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*State Victim Advocate*

Testimony of Natasha M. Pierre, Esq., State Victim Advocate  
Submitted to the Appropriations Committee  
Friday, February 19, 2016  
**Re: The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) Budget**

Good day Senator Bye, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. For the record, my name is Natasha Pierre and I am the Victim Advocate for the State of Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony concerning OVA's budget.

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) was statutorily established in 1998 as an **independent state agency** charged with the promotion and protection of the constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims in Connecticut. OVA seeks to ensure that all crime victims have the opportunity to exercise their constitutional rights during the criminal court process.

In fiscal year 2015, the OVA opened 120 cases to assist crime victims when their constitutional rights were violated on cases of assault, bullying, burglary/theft, domestic violence, elder abuse, harassment/stalking, home invasion, homicide/murder, identity theft, motor vehicle violations and sexual assault (see attached annual report for more information).

The OVA provides oversight of state and private agencies, provides advocacy to crime victims when a violation of their rights is at issue, and receives and reviews complaints of persons concerning the actions of any state agency or other entity that provides services to crime victims. When appropriate, the OVA may also initiate formal investigations into the circumstances of a complaint so as to remedy the concern in a systemic manner.

OVA's main role is to ensure that crime victims' rights are respected and implemented within each branch of government. As such, it is essential that the agency remain an

independent agency. The Governor's budget proposes to block grant the OVA's funding through the Office of Government Accountability (OGA), rather than identifying a separate line item. Per CGS § 1-300, the OGA was established in 2011 to consolidate human relations and administrative office functions for the state watchdog agencies. As you can imagine, the watchdog agencies were concerned about their ability to perform their functions under this structure, and the Legislature responded by passing specific language to ensure agency autonomy:

Nothing in this section shall be construed to affect or limit the independent decision-making authority of .... the Office of the Victim Advocate.... Such decision-making authority includes, but is not limited to, decisions concerning budgetary issues.... (CGS § 1-300).

However, five years later this proposal grants the Office of Governmental Accountability authority over the OVA's budgetary matters. We request that the OVA's line item remain a separate line item within the OGA budget.

I thank you for your consideration.