



Testimony of James T. Shearin
President, Connecticut Bar Foundation
Appropriations Committee
February 19, 2016

Good afternoon Sen. Bye, Rep. Walker, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is James T. Shearin and I offer this testimony as President of the Connecticut Bar Foundation (“Foundation”) to express the Foundation’s concerns with respect to changes proposed to the Judicial Branch’s budget in **House Bill 5044 An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2017**. The Foundation and the Judicial Branch share a common goal: to provide access to justice to all of Connecticut’s citizens, regardless of economic means. While our organization recognizes that Connecticut’s fiscal situation may require cuts in various programs throughout state government, it urges the Legislature to pause and consider the impact that such sweeping cuts on the Judicial Branch will have on a population that often remains voiceless.

The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization devoted to funding the delivery of legal services to the poor by providing grants-in-aid to nonprofit organizations providing civil legal representation to low income people. Pursuant to Connecticut General Statute §51-81c, the judges of the Superior Court have designated the Foundation to administer the interest on lawyers’ trust accounts program, the fees imposed upon certain court filings under the Judicial Branch’s Court Fees Grants-in-Aid program, and the Judicial Branch’s Grants-in-Aid program. The Foundation presently supports ten civil legal service providers in Connecticut who address

the legal needs of those who constitute Connecticut's poverty population, a group of people who, since 2007, has grown from 37.3 million to 46.7 million. As the number of people who qualify as poor has grown, so have their legal needs. For many of these people, their ability to secure the most basic human needs depends entirely on the legal aid lawyers who are willing to advocate on their behalf. Without the zealous and passionate representation of these lawyers, those who face the loss of basic human needs – including housing, safety from domestic violence, health care benefits, employment, and educational opportunities – are often ill-equipped to protect their legal rights.

In recent years, the Judicial Branch has done its very best to provide assistance to the vulnerable and low income population in the state by enhancing its court service centers, providing administrative support for in-court sponsored pro bono programs and technical support for self-represented litigants, and funding grants-in-aid programs to help ensure that all persons have access to justice. The proposed cuts to the Judicial Branch budget, however, could have a profound impact on those whose only hope for the fair and impartial adjudication of their rights depends on a court system that is adequately funded and can deliver services that address their exigent needs.

The societal costs of slowing the progress we have made in representing the poor - leaving individuals to struggle to obtain just results through ineffective self-representation or worse, allowing their rights to be trampled - is far greater than any budget savings that may cripple the Judicial Branch's ability to meet the public's need for courts that are open, accessible, and fair for all.