



The Children's LAW Center of Connecticut

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www.clcct.org

Testimony to the Appropriations Committee In support of continued funding of the Children's Law Center February 19, 2016

Good evening Co-Chairs, Senator Bye & Representative Walker; Ranking Members Senator Kane & Representative Ziobron; and members of the committee.

My name is Justine Rakich-Kelly and I am the Executive Director of the Children's Law Center. CLC is a unique organization whose core service is providing legal advocates to children in highly contentious family court cases. **Our services are unduplicated by any other agency or private organization in the state.**

In this budget climate, protecting the services that help the neediest must remain Connecticut's top priority. CLC receives a grant of \$109,838 from the state through the Judicial Branch. We are so grateful to the legislature and the Judicial Branch for funding our work. This year, **we respectfully ask that this committee restore the individual CLC line item that the governor's budget draft eliminated, and ensure level funding of our program.**

We understand that this committee is faced with very difficult decisions each year, and especially this year. In light of this, we thought it would be most helpful to use this as an opportunity to remind you of what CLC does with the \$109,838 it receives, and why our organization is already doing more with less.

CLC is a legal aid for children whose parents are fighting over their custody in family court.

We are court-appointed, either because parents have agreed to it, it is an emergency situation, or the parents have exhausted the other options available to them. **We cannot be hired by parents.**

We work with a staff social worker to develop parenting plans that are uniquely applicable to each family and child. Our social worker identifies issues and makes referrals to parents to improve parenting and strengthen families. We help parents understand the effect of high conflict on children.

We encourage parents to understand the value each brings to the life of their children: both parents matter. However, **our recommendations are child centric**, focusing on the unique needs of each child.

Our members work in various roles on behalf of children:

Guardians *ad litem* (GALs), act as witnesses for the Court-- provide recommendations and testify, representing the best interests of the child.

Attorneys for Minor Child (AMCs), act as attorneys for the child-- file motions, call and cross examine witnesses, and make argument to advance wishes of the child, tempered by assessment of best interests.

The judge decides our role, GAL or AMC, and the limits of that role via a court order. **CLC is brought in to work on specific cases after the judge has found the parties to be indigent.**





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CLC also administers a **"Families in Transition" program**, serving as mediators, helping parents resolve their disputes outside of the Court process. Via mediation, we educate parents about the effects of their conflict on children. We use a gender-balanced mediation team, with one person having a legal background and the other having a mental health background. Our mediation services are paid for on a sliding scale.

Additionally, we provide free access to **"Lawline,"** a legal hotline to answer questions about legal issues affecting children: custody, access, support, education, DCF, etc. If we cannot answer a question, we will refer callers to an appropriate agency.

CLC does NOT bill parents for GAL or AMC services.

The state funding we receive is used to cover these costs, via the Office of the Chief Public Defender, and with additional financial support from private donations and grants. **We are paid a flat fee of \$750 per client by the Office of the Chief Public Defender, even though the average cost per case is approximately \$1,200-1,500.** In the event that a case takes an extreme amount of time, our attorneys stay on the case without additional resources, to make sure the child's best interests are represented. To continue to take on the amount of cases we currently do, we would need maintain our current funding at \$109,838.

If our funding is cut, we will no longer be able to serve the number of indigent children and families that require our services.

We sincerely thank you for your continued support and for the opportunity to testify here today. CLC is committed to our work of advocating for children in the most challenging of situations, and we hope that this work is sustained with the legislature's continued funding of our program.

