



Greater Hartford Legal Aid



Connecticut Legal Services



NEW HAVEN
LEGAL
ASSISTANCE
ASSOCIATION, INC.

Before the Judiciary Committee

March 23, 2016

Testimony of

Steven Eppler-Epstein, Executive Director, Connecticut Legal Services

Before the Judiciary Committee on March 1, 2016

Re: H.B. 5639 AAC Connecticut's Leadership in Corporation and Business Law

Representative Tong, Senator Coleman, and Members of the Committee,

We submit this testimony in Support of Section 113(c) of H.B 5639, An Act Concerning Connecticut's Leadership in Corporation and Business Law. That section would provide additional funds to help address the crisis in funding for legal services to the poor in Connecticut.

Connecticut's legal aid programs, including Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, and New Haven Legal Assistance, help Connecticut residents who are very low income, and encounter life crises. Our clients have problems for which a lawyer's help is particularly impactful – issues of domestic violence, risk to housing stability, the need for government benefits, issues regarding disability, and issues facing the elderly. We are overwhelmed with applications for assistance, because the need for legal help is so widespread and because our lawyers make such a great difference in their clients' lives.

Unfortunately, not only does the need far outstrip our capacity, but the problem has been getting steadily worse, despite the very significant efforts of this Committee in recent years to address the legal services funding crisis. As a result of funding pressures, we have been forced to reduce staffing and services by over 20%. There have been periods of significant staff furloughs. Even with those and other cost-saving measures, we are facing a funding deficit in the coming year of almost \$2 million. The crisis would result in further cutbacks of staffing and services, at a time when legal aid is desperately needed as this state's legal safety net.

This committee's action on Monday to JF S.B. 428 is a huge step towards preventing that further crisis. We deeply appreciate the committee's support and dedication to the cause of justice for all, no matter what their income.

Section 113(c) of H.B. 5639 would be a further step in that direction. It would assess a fee of \$25 per party per day, for cases pending on the docket of the Connecticut Center for Commercial Claims. The revenues would be dedicated to the funding of legal services to the poor, through the same mechanism used for distribution of funds received through the program of Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts.

We deeply appreciate and support this funding proposal, as it would provide a crucial element to help close the legal aid funding crisis.

Thank you for your support.