SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

JUDICIARY
10:00 a.m.

COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING

CHAIRPERSON: Representative Steve Stafstrom, Senator Gary Winfield

SENATORS: Kissel

REPRESENTATIVES: Blumenthal, Concepcion, Conley, Champagne, Dubitsky, Fox, Horn, McGorty, Palm, Rebimbas, Young

REP. BLUMENTHAL (147TH): -- follow any instructions from the Capitol, please. Do not delay and do not return unless and until you are advised it is safe to do so. In the event of a lockdown announcement, please remain in the hearing room, stay away from the exit doors, and seek concealment behind desks and chairs until an all-clear announcement is heard.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Thank you. We have one item on our public hearing agenda and that’s the nomination of Soline M. Oslena of Oakdale to be a workers’ compensation commissioner. Mrs. Oslena, Attorney Oslena, come on up. And before you take a seat, if you could just raise your right hand. Do you swear or affirm, as the case may be, that the information you will provide to this committee will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God or penalty of perjury?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: I do.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Great. Please have a seat. Make sure the microphone in front of you is turned
on. And if you have an opening statement, feel free to make it.

SOLINE M. OSELENA: Good morning, Cochair Winfield, Cochair Stafstrom, Ranking Member Kissel, Ranking Member Rebimbas, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Soline M. Oslena of Oakdale. It is a great honor and privilege to be here today regarding my nomination as a workers’ compensation commissioner. I am grateful to Governor Ned Lamont for this nomination and his confidence in me to -- in my ability to serve the citizens of Connecticut as a workers’ compensation commissioner. I’m married to Leo Paul Pier-Lewis [phonetic] and we have three children. Our oldest, Selina Morales, is 21 years old and a United States marine, currently stationed in North Carolina. Our son, Alex St. Lucent [phonetic], is 16 years old and is a junior at Montville High School. And our youngest, Leona Pier-Lewis is 7 years old and a third grader at the Oakdale Elementary. I was born in Haiti in Port-au-Prince, small town called Carrefour. My mother immigrated to Brooklyn when I was just 7 years old leaving me behind with my stepfather and my three sisters. A year later, I made the journey to Brooklyn and joined my mother. I lived in East Flatbush in Brooklyn with my mother who helped me for several years to raise my older two children while I worked several jobs and attended college. Despite many challenging circumstances, I continued to pursue my education, and in 2005, I earned a bachelor’s degree in legal studies from New York City College of Technology. When my mother lost her battle with cancer in 2007, I relocated to Connecticut where I’m now proud to call home. I continued to pursue my dream of becoming an
attorney. Following my mother’s death, it was quite difficult. Being a single mother with two young children, it was a struggle to work fulltime while traveling over an hour to attend law school at night and on weekends. I was very fortunate to have met my husband Leo in 2008, as he took on many responsibilities. In 2010, I earned a law degree from Southern New England School of Law, and in 2011, I was admitted to the Connecticut Bar. While attending law school, I worked for Attorney Bart Sayet as a paralegal. And in 2011, he was gracious enough to keep me on as an associate. My caseload has consisted mostly with workers’ compensation, personal injury, real estate transactions, family law, and housing matters. I have handled a large and varied caseload representing a diverse clientele. This experience together with my background has enabled me to develop the necessary skills to work effectively with people of different social, cultural, and age groups. It is workers’ compensation that has brought me the most satisfaction because I have been able to help people through a difficult in their lives. I help my clients gain a better understanding of the workers’ compensation process while working to make sure that they obtain the necessary medical treatment and income benefits in a timely fashion. I also help them cope through their time of recovery and assist them in returning to work. I’ve always been compassionate, thoughtful, and respectful of how stressful my clients’ lives can become after a workplace injury. I’ve participated in hundreds of workers’ compensation hearings representing my clients. I sincerely believe that my character and temperament qualify me to be a successful workers’ compensation commissioner. My personal journey
provides me with a unique perspective. Having been an immigrant, having lived through poverty and challenging environments to now having this wonderful opportunity to speak in front of you, I have the experience of dealing with people of all walks of life. And I am also bilingual. If confirmed as a workers' compensation commissioner, I will work tirelessly to uphold the state of the law, the laws of -- Sorry. I will work tirelessly to uphold the laws of the state of Connecticut in a fair and just manner for claimants and respondents alike. I am excited and eager to commence my journey as a workers' compensation commissioner and I humbly ask for your support. I thank you for your time and I’m happy to answer any questions that this committee may have of me.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Thank you, Attorney Oslena. If you could just give us a little bit more depth on your experience before the Connecticut Workers' Compensation Commission. I think you said -- You mentioned briefly in your opening that you’ve handled hundreds of cases before the Commission? Is that correct?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Yes, that is correct. I’ve handled lots and lots of hearings, both in the state of Connecticut, as well as Mashantucket and Mohegan.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): And you noted on your application that the vast majority of those have been on the claimant side. Correct?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: That is correct.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Okay. Can you give us an assurance that coming from a claimant’s background
that you’ll be fair and impartial in evaluating the cases before you?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Yes, absolutely. During my time while I was representing my clients, I did so diligently with passion. However, as a workers' compensation commissioner, I understand that my job would be in the role of an adjudicator. I would apply the laws to all parties fairly and equally to respondents and claimants alike.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Great. Thank you and congratulations on your nomination.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Thank you.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Questions from the committee. Senator Kissel.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): Congratulations.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Thank you.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): You had mentioned your, the law school you graduated from, but I didn’t catch it. Could you say it again?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Yes. It was Southern New England School of Law. They’re currently now known as UMass Law.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): Okay. Because I went to Western New England, and I had no idea there was a Southern New England. And again, along the lines of what Chairman Stafstrom said, what was your relationship with attorneys for the respondent?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: I’ve worked well with attorneys on the respondent side. We’ve always gotten along. I was always able to get the results that I needed for my clients.
SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): Okay. And you said you’re bilingual. I’m assuming the other language is Spanish?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: I speak Creole and French.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): Wow! All right. So you’re trilingual.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Yes.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): Okay. I’m not sure how many French claimants are out there. But who knows? All I can say is congratulations. I think --

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Thank you.

SENATOR KISSEL (7TH): -- you know, just hearing your background and the way that you sort of lifted yourself up from your bootstraps, and, you know, you had heartbreak with your mom. I don’t know -- After college, I moved back home and then went to law school during the day. And that was hard. Just moving back home after college and being away for four years, that was hard. I can’t imagine raising two children and going to night school and weekends and getting your law degree. So that in and of itself just proves real hard work ethic. But I also think that you’re at a great age. I think workers' compensation is unique in that you’re not encumbered by really meticulous strict rules of evidence. You sort of have a lot of latitude to do what’s right. And I think you’re just gonna do an outstanding job. So I’m very happy to support your nomination. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Thank you.
REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Thank you, Senator. Further questions from the committee. Representative Conley.

REP. CONLEY (40TH): Thank you, Chairman. Thank you for being here, Attorney Oslena. I’d like to let the other members know that I work, I worked with Attorney Oslena for years, as she represents injured workers for, other injured workers than I do. And not only -- I think the most important about this nominee is her temperament. I have seen you in action. I have seen you as often, just like in this building sometimes, in the Workers’ Comp Commission, we have to wait our turn or wait for things to start. And Attorney Oslena’s always prepared. She’s always ready to argue her case. But I found most importantly last week, there was a bar association event where Attorney Oslena was not there, and the respondents, the people who represent the insurance companies, many of them, over ten of them, made it a point to come up to me, knowing this hearing was coming, and speak highly about her. So the folks on the other side of the aisle telling me that she’s always prepared, that her knowledge on the law is very good, and that they are excited for her to be a commissioner, not worried about how she will pivot the role from a claimant’s attorney to an advocate. And people spoke about your temperament, that you’re always ready to listen, that you’re fair, and that they’re looking forward to you being part of the commission. So as folks on both side of the aisle are looking forward to you being a member of the commission, I fully support this nominee.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Thank you.
REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Thank you, Representative Conley. Representative Dubitsky.

REP. DUBITSKY (47TH): Good morning. Thank you for coming in.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Good morning.

REP. DUBITSKY (47TH): You have a very compelling story. I’m looking at your -- It’s not really an application, but your information packet, your questionnaire. And you -- It asks you to list the ten most significant workers’ comp hearings you’ve handled in your career. And you certainly laid out ten, ten hearings. But it also asks for the number of formal hearings you’ve tried to conclusion before the commissioners in the past 5 years. And there isn’t anything there. Is it that you haven’t tried any? Or was that just an omission?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: No, it’s just that I’ve never tried any hearings to formal. However, I’ve had several hearings that have been scheduled for formals. They just never made it to that point because we were able to resolve the matters. As you know, in Workers’ Comp, oftentimes, they’re resolved prior to the formal stage.

REP. DUBITSKY (47TH): Okay. So the list of ten significant hearings, those all were resolved before having to go to a final formal hearing?

SOLINE M. OSLENA: That is correct, yes.

REP. DUBITSKY (47TH): Okay. Thank you very much. That was my only question. And thank you for coming in and good luck in the process.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Thank you.
REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): Further questions from the committee. Seeing none. Thank you so much for being with us today.

SOLINE M. OSLENA: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

REP. STAFSTROM (129TH): I have no one signed up on the public list to testify. Is there any member of the audience who would like to say something? Going once, going twice, three times. If not, I will declare this public hearing closed. We will recess the public hearing and convene the committee meeting. Attorney Oslena, you’re, you’re free to, you’re free to get up from there.