

EXECUTIVE AND LEGISLATIVE 11:00 a.m.
NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING

CHAIRPERSON: Representative Edwin
Vargas

SENATORS: Bergstein, Duff, Fasano,
Formica, Hartley, Kushner,
Looney, Moore, Witkos

REPRESENTATIVES: D'Agostino, Davis,
DiMassa, Godfrey, Perillo,
Phipps, Verrengia,
Yaccarino

REP. VARGAS (6TH): [Gavel x2]. I'm hereby calling the Executive and Legislative nominations committee public hearing to order. We have before us a few resolutions, but before we get into that, I'm going to ask our clerk to read the safety information.

CLERK: In the interest of safety, I would ask that you note the location of and access to the exits in this hearing room. The two doors for which you entered the room are the emergency exits and are marked with exit signs. In the event of an emergency, please walk quickly to the nearest exit. After exiting the room, go to your right and exit the building by the main entrance or follow the exit signs to one of the other exits. Please quickly exit the building and follow any instructions from the Capitol Police. Do not delay and do not return unless and until you are advised that it is safe to do so. In the event of a lockdown announcement, please remain in the hearing room and stay away from the exit doors until an "all clear" announcement is heard.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you. That brings us to the next item on the agenda, which are Resolutions

for review. There's a House Joint Resolution for the Honorable Maureen D. Dennis of Southport, who has been appointed to be a member of the Judicial Review Council. Will you please come forward and before you take a seat, would you please raise your right hand and promise to tell us the truth and nothing but the truth?

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: [Mic turned off].

REP. VARGAS (6TH): You may be seated, and just quickly, it's customary for us to -- to allow the nominees to make an initial presentation after which we open it up for committee members to ask questions, and you'll see that people will be coming in and out. We're all serving on multiple committees in this building, so -- but votes are kept open until 4 p.m., and every member of the committee will have an opportunity to cast a vote. We also at the end of the public hearing if there's anybody from the public that likes to -- would like to speak either pro or con, one of the nominations may also do so, and if there's any written communication, we enter it into the record. And, without further ado, the floor is yours.

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: [Mic turned off] [Audio starts here] To be here today to answer the questions you may have regarding my nomination. I'm hopeful that the past -- excuse me. I'm hopeful that the past 25 years that I've been a judge, as well as my 8 years on the Commission for Judicial Ethics will be helpful to me in -- in sitting on this -- the Judicial Review Council if approved by this committee. In the past 25 years, I have sat in various areas in the criminal court, juvenile court, both delinquency and child protection, family court, and housing court, so I do have a variety of

experience, and I did actually begin serving as an interim appointee on the Judicial Review Council in December 2019, and it's definitely a serious commitment, and it's a -- it's a huge time commitment in terms of reading through the complaints and detail and being prepared, but if my nomination is approved, I'm committed to do the work and give it the attention that it deserves. If you have any questions, I'd be happy to respond.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, first of all, let me congratulate you on -- is this a re-nomination or a new appointment?

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: No. This is a -- a first nomination.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, let me congratulate you on your appointment by the governor for the Judicial Review Council, and I can see your eminently qualified to serve on the -- on the Review Council. This is a body that we've been discussing here at the legislature in terms of seeing if we can expand some of the authority on some issues. Do you have any thoughts on -- on the council yourself, not having served yet?

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: Well, I don't have any particular thoughts. Do you know what areas you're thinking of potentially expanding to?

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, one of the issues that has come up when we discussed the Review Council is how much authority they have to actually intervene in certain cases, and some of the members mentioned that they would welcome an expansion of those -- of those duties and that authority. Because right now the Judicial Review Council is circumscribed to certain -- certain limited areas of review, but

perhaps when you come for your reconfirmation next time --

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: [Laughing].

REP. VARGAS (6TH): You will be able to bring us a treasure trove of ideas, but uh --

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: Well, at this point, we are -- we are limited to finding whether or not there's a violation of the code of judicial conduct, and what I'm seeing -- what I knew anecdotally in the past and what I'm seeing from the brief time that I sat as an interim appointee is that the -- the majority of the complaints are filed by pro se litigants, and they do often seem to confuse being dissatisfied with an opinion, a decision that has been entered in a case, which is a subject for appellate review as opposed to violations of the code of judicial conduct, so many of the complaints really are -- are dissatisfaction with the ultimate result, and obviously, there's almost always one side dissatisfied with the result, but the remedy for that is -- is to take an appeal, so it's -- anyway.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Yeah. That's a common confusion in the public. They believe that people can somehow nullify decisions made by court, you know. I get those calls every so often. You're my Representative, why don't you call the judge, and I say that's a separate branch of government.

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: [Laughing].

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Get yourself an attorney, but anyway, I have -- I have no further questions. Well, congratulations again.

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: Okay.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): But, before we leave you, we have one question that we ask all members of the committee before we let them go, so don't take this personal. This is a standard question. Is there anything in your past that you believe might prove embarrassing to this committee, to the governor, or to the state of Connecticut?

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: No, sir.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you very much.

MAUREEN D. DENNIS: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And, that concludes the House Joint Resolutions for review. Now, we have one Senate Joint Resolution -- and we have actually two Senate Joint Resolutions for review. The first the Honorable Gladys Idelis Nieves of New Haven to be an alternate member of the Judicial Review Council. Please raise your right hand. Do you promise to tell us the truth and nothing but the truth?

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Yes.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Please be seated, and as is customary, this is a time for your to make your opening remarks, so the floor is yours.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Well, thank you. Good morning esteemed members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. I am truly honored to be before you here today, and I would like to thank Governor Ned Lamont for nominating me for appointment as an alternate member of the Judicial Review Council.

First, by way of background, I was born and raised in Meriden, Connecticut, and I currently reside in New Haven. I'm a graduate of Yale University and

the NYU School of Law. In 2014, I was appointed to the bench to serve as a family support magistrate. Immediately prior to my appointment as a family support magistrate, I had a solo family law practice focusing on child protection litigation, juvenile matters, and probate court. I also served as a legal consultant to the Domestic Violence Crisis Center in Stamford, Connecticut. Before starting my law practice, I worked as a senior staff attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy here in Hartford and ran a legal clinic located within the Connecticut Children's Medical Center. I am humbled to have been asked to serve on the Judicial Review Council. I view the work of the Judicial Review Council to be extremely important, and I assure you that if appointed I will take honest responsibility with integrity and with due diligence. I welcome any questions you may have.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And, this is an initial appointment also?

GALDYS IDELIS NIEVES: Yes.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, I want to congratulate you on the -- on your appointment --

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): By Governor Lamont, and like I said to the previous nominee, you know once you've had some experience perhaps you'll share --

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: [Laughing]. Yeah.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Some of your experiences with us, but I -- I really don't have any questions. It seems to me that you're eminently qualified to serve as an alternate on the Judiciary Review Council. Representative Perillo.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): Well, first of all, congratulations.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Thank you.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): And, thank you for being here today. Just one question.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Yes.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): So, I mean in your role both as a magistrate and attorney, you're very familiar, of course, with -- with what makes a good judge perhaps not -- what are the considerations that you think you will have in determining who should or should not move forward?

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: You mean as -- as a judge? Because my understanding as part of the Judicial Review Council is to determine whether there's been any violations of the rules of judicial conduct.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): Let me rephrase the question.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Okay, sir.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): And, I can see how what I said was confusing.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Yes.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): So, what are the factors that might indicate that action needs to be taken against someone --

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Okay.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): Yeah.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Well, obviously, to review and to make sure that they have not violated the -- the rules. I mean bottom line is that I think that we all do and should take the provisions within the,

you know, rules of conduct seriously, so I think when action needs to be taken is when there's been a violation. Obviously, I think the proper investigation needs to be made to determine if that actually happened because obviously we don't want to, you know, not to the proper due diligence to make sure if there was an actual violation. I think that there's a lot of things that happen on the bench as a magistrate and as I think you heard my predecessor say a lot of people may not be happy with what was done or what the ultimate result, but at the end of the day you have to ensure judicial independence and protect that, but at the same time, those individuals that serve as judges need to make sure that they do it in obviously the proper manner, so again, making sure that they don't violate any of the rules, and so I think once that violation is found to be actually have occurred, then I think at that point some sort of action needs to be taken, and it depends on what type of violation and how, you know, the degree of the violation and -- like I haven't served on the Judicial Review Council yet, so I really can't comment on you know what type of action is always necessary, but I think once a violation is found some action needs to take place, and obviously, to -- to protect the public but also respect and you know of the judiciary. I think it's important that that takes place.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): Thanks very much.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: You're welcome.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Perillo. My vice chair, Representative Phipps, and I were at a meeting last night. We were discussing the lack of diversity in some of our boards and commissions, so I'm happy to see a Latino woman --

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Being appointed. Representative Phipps, any questions? If not, once again, I want to congratulate you --

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): On your appointment by -- by the governor, and I hope to see you back for your re-appointment, and hopefully as a full member of the board next time around.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Well, thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Okay.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Oh, before I let you go, we have a question we ask of all our nominees. Is there anything in your past that you believe might prove embarrassing either to this committee, to the governor, or to the state of Connecticut?

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: No.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you very much.

GLADYS IDELIS NIEVES: Okay. Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And, that brings us to our final nominee for today attorney Genea Odessa Bell of Colchester to be an alternate member of the Judicial Review Council. Would you please raise your right hand before you're seated and let us know are you going to tell us the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

GENEA ODESSA BELL: Yes. I do.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, please be seated. I see we've been joined by Representative Yaccarino, and

as is customary, at this time, you can make your initial statement, I'd just like to say I had the opportunity to -- to meet the nominee outside, and we had a nice little chat, so go ahead. The floor is yours.

GENEA ODESSA BELL: Thank you. Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. My name is Genea Bell. It is a great honor to have been nominated for appointment as an attorney alternate to the Judicial Review Council by Governor Lamont. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to speak about my desire to continue to serve on the Judicial Review Council now in a new capacity.

I grew up in South Carolina. I moved to New York City to attend college at the Juilliard School. After college, I became an elementary school teacher in Brooklyn, New York, but Connecticut has been my home since 2003 when I moved here with my then fiancé, Todd. Since then, I have gotten married, enrolled in and graduated from the University of Connecticut School of Law, I've bought a home, and had three beautiful and I would save above-average children now 10, 12, and 14. I've sold a home, and I've supported my husband as he enrolled in and completed his PhD at the University of Connecticut.

I've had the pleasure of serving my community as a trustee at the University of Hartford's Heart School, and the director with the Center for Children's Advocacy, and as chair of the town of Colchester Ethics Commission. I have had the privilege of serving my profession as a past president, vice president, and board member of the George W. Crawford Black Bar Association. I was honored to receive in 2016 the Maxwell Heiman Award

from the Hartford County Bar Association -- Board --
Bar Association.

For the past four years, I have also had the opportunity to serve the state of Connecticut as an attorney member of the Judicial Review Council. As a member of the council, I heard and deliberated on complaints from pro se litigants, from represented parties, and from attorneys. I was impressed with the earnest and fair way each member of the council approached the issues regardless of the identity of the complaint. As one might imagine, in a group two-thirds of whom are lawyers, discussion was also robust and sometimes lasted perhaps a bit longer than is strictly necessary. To be sure, we did not always agree on the points being made, but we were unified in our commitment to carrying out our statutory charge to assess fully and fairly claims of judicial misconduct. Although I started my legal career in private practice at two law firms and my current role at Community Health Services, I am rarely before the bench. On those occasions when I do step into a courtroom, I am struck by the enormity of the task our system is daily being asked to do as well as the diligence, dignity, and professionalism required of those who are asked to do it. At our Community Health Center, we are committed to providing the highest quality care for every patient who seeks services with us every day. We care for them regardless of where they were born, what languages they speak, whether or not they have stable housing, whether or not they have been incarcerated, and regardless of their ability to pay for our services. Much like our Health Center, our courts are available to everyone regardless of their status or perceived lack of it.

As an attorney alternative member of the Judicial Review Council, I will continue to support the council in upholding these same principles. I would like to thank the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee for your time and consideration and for the opportunity to appear before you today. Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you for that introductory statement, and so you mentioned you're from Brooklyn, New York.

GENEA ODESSA BELL: I [chuckling] lived and worked there for many years. Yes. I'm from Columbia, South Carolina originally.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Yeah. I was born in Sunset Park.

GENEA ODESSA BELL: Oh.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): I grew up in that area, but I came here in '72 as a -- as a public school teacher. I really I enjoyed listening to you speak about the work you do with the Community Clinic, and --

GENEA ODESSA BELL: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And, like I said about our previous nominee, the fact is that you know it seems like Governor Lamont is trying to address the issue of diversity on these councils and boards and commissions, and it's good to have had that diversity, and at this point, I'll open it up for -- for our committee members. Does either Yaccarino or Representative Phipps have any questions? If not, you know I want to congratulate you again on your appointment by the governor for the Review Council. This is initial appointment, so.

GENEA ODESSA BELL: This is an initial appointment as an alternate. I have served my four-year term as board member.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Oh, all right, so you do have some experience.

GENEA ODESSA BELL: I do.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): So, maybe -- maybe you can share with us --

GENEA ODESSA BELL: [Laughing].

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Do you think that the council's -- the scope of the council's area of responsibility are too narrow or do you think they should be expanded? What are your thoughts on that?

GENEA ODESSA BELL: So, thank you for giving me a second. I want to give you a thoughtful answer.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): No. Take your time. Take your time.

GENEA ODESSA BELL: [Laughing]. Thank you. I believe --

REP. VARGAS (6TH): You're the final nominee. And, by the way, all nominees are welcome to stay because we -- after the hearing, we immediately follow it with -- with our meeting and we take a vote.

GENEA ODESSA BELL: I see. Thank you. So, I do believe that the statutory charge is appropriate to the committee, that we are there to make a determination about whether there's been judicial conduct. Well I will -- what I will tell you is that we do take an -- we have taken an awful lot of care to ensure that conduct that falls short of misconduct but might otherwise be undesirable for

the public facing the bench, is appropriately discussed, and so while I would not recommend that at this time that there would be necessarily an expansion of the council's charge, I -- I do acknowledge that the council has developed some strategies and creative ways to provide feedback when there is a concern about temperament in a particular matter, and so you know I have developed a real appreciation for what my judge colleagues on the council face every day in the courtroom. Not every day is like Law and Order. There are many litigants and members of the public who may not necessarily be showing the court or the judges the respect that they are owed, and that we expect judges to show to litigants and to the public, and so again, I have developed a respect for the enormity of that task, and at the same time, I do think that judges as often as the face of our legal system, I don't think it's unreasonable to expect, you know, communication with respect and dignity and the professionalism that I spoke about earlier, and so I do think that the committee really takes care to note where that may have happened in a particular case and to develop strategies to maybe communicate that this falls short of misconduct but maybe, you know, the message might have been delivered in a different way.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): I understand maybe perhaps unseemly behavior but not falling short of something unethical or -- but let me ask you a question. Refresh my memory. One of the issues with the -- with the Judicial Review Council that I can remember correctly is that it does not play a role in terms of legislative advocacy for -- for policy recommendations to the state legislature; am I correct on that?

GENEA ODESSA BELL: That I'm not sure about.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Because I think that was one of the areas where I think some of the -- because I think right now in terms of policy recommendations it's the administrative judges and it's basically they are the ones that are present here at the legislature making recommendations for -- for any modifications that need to happen, and I believe from last year's nominees I believe I -- I heard some of them say that they -- they would like to play a larger policy role because obviously there must be certain issues that repeat themselves and that might be addressed with some policy changes. But, you know, like I said, that's an idea, and you know, but it seemed to me that if the -- if this Judicial Review Council is working with these issues that it might come up with -- I know you've come up with some internal strategies on how to deal with these issues, but maybe there might be some systemic policy recommendations that could be made by the Review Council. Well, thank you again for -- for being here, and I have to ask you the question I ask of all nominees. Is there anything in your past that you -- may prove embarrassing to this committee, to the governor, or to the state of Connecticut?

GENEA ODESSA BELL: No, sir.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you very much, and that concludes our interview of nominees. Will the clerk please announce the time and date of our next meeting? [Background announcement]. Or -- or we'll do that after the meeting. All right. So, [gavel] this concludes the public hearing portion. Now, we're starting our business portion of the meeting. But, first, any remarks by the chairs? Oh, anyone

from the public that -- that -- I don't believe I saw anybody. There was nobody signed up was there? And, was there any written communication, Madam Clerk?

CLERK: No.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): No. All right. So, now, we're into the business portion. Any remarks by -- by my vice-chair? No. All I can say is I -- I believe all three nominees are amply qualified, so let's start with the first order of business. The Honorable Maureen D. Dennis of Southport to be a member of the Judicial Review Council. Do I have a motion?

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): (inaudible - 00:24:17)

REP. VARGAS (6TH): I'll second it. And, will Madam Clerk please take the roll?

CLERK: Duff. Vargas.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Yes.

CLERK: Looney. Phipps.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): Yes.

CLERK: Fasano. Perillo. Bergstein. Davis. D'Agostino. DiMassa. Formica. Godfrey. Hartley. Kushner. Moore. Verrengia. Witkos. Yaccarino.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, a few of them were here earlier, and I'm sure some of them will come before four to cast their votes at the -- at the election -- the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee office. We'll keep the votes open until 4 p.m., and that brings us to our second nominee. The Honorable Gladys Idelis Nieves of New Haven to be an alternate member of the Judicial Review Council. Do

I have a motion? [Background speaker off mic].
Excuse me? [Background speaker off mic] Oh, we --
well, it's a Joint Resolution. That's a question
I've always had. When it's purely a Senate
Resolution, I know we need the Senators, but when
it's a Joint Resolution, can the House members make
the motion? [Background speaker off mic]. It's not
a pure Senate Resolution. It's a Joint Resolution.

CLERK: I believe if it's a Joint Resolution --

REP. VARGAS (6TH): That it would be appropriate?

CLERK: That anyone can -- that anyone can --

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Do we have the attorney?
[Background speaker off mic]. It's appropriate?
Oh, okay.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): (Mic off).

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Second. There's no change. We
both -- both reflect both members present of the
committee are voting in the affirmative for this
motion.

CLERK: Yes, sir.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And, that brings us to our last
nominee, Attorney Genea Odessa Bell of Colchester to
be an alternate member of the Judicial Review
Council.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): (inaudible - 00:26:11)

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Second. And, no change in the
vote, so please cast our two votes as in the
affirmative. And, as stated earlier, we'll keep the
meeting open until 4 p.m. And, now Madam Clerk,
would you please announce our next meeting?

CLERK: The next meeting and hearing will be on March 3. Judge Kavanewsky did not appear today, but he will appear with the rest of the judicial selection nominees on the 3rd.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): So, the next meeting will be on the 3rd, right here in Room 1A?

CLERK: Yes.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): We've been joined by Representative DiMassa, and before you leave, you can cast your votes. We have three great nominees for the Judicial Review Council. Anything you'd like to say before we close up the meeting, Rep -- Representative DiMassa?

REP. DIMASSA (116TH): Oh, no. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just in my absence I apologize. There's so many meetings going on in this building, it's hard to keep up, but certainly, I support all the nominees, and vote yes on all of them. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you, Representative DiMassa. I explained to the people present in the room -- in the hearing room that it's a very tough time for the building and everybody's stretched thin around the building. Well, thank you, and thank you, Madam Clerk, and that concludes our business for today. [Gavel].