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Connecticut General Assembly Planning and Development Committee Public Hearing

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Testimony of Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas

Dear Co-Chairs, Rahman and Kavros DeGraw; Vice Chairs Chafee and Needleman; Ranking Members Gordon and Zullo; and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on **HB 7150 An Act Concerning Justices of the Peace**.

I am writing to express my support for the passage of **HB 7150**. This legislation is crucial in modernizing the role of justices of the peace and ensuring accountability, transparency, and professionalism in their appointment and duties.

Justices of the peace are entrusted with significant responsibilities, including officiating marriages, administering oaths, and witnessing legal documents. However, there is currently no oversight, supervision, or training requirements of justices. It is critical that these public officials perform their duties with the highest level of integrity and competence. This bill establishes a framework for ensuring that justices of the peace are properly trained and held accountable for their actions.

- **Section 1** of the bill mandates that justices of the peace pass a written examination administered by the Secretary of the State, a critical step toward ensuring that those entrusted with legal and ceremonial duties have the necessary knowledge of state law and ethical standards. By introducing mandatory training and examination, we are addressing concerns raised by Town Clerks and the State Vital Records Office about inconsistencies and errors in the execution of their duties. Justices of the peace must be equipped with the knowledge to perform their roles in a manner that upholds the rule of law and the public trust.

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- **Section 2** emphasizes accountability by setting clear guidelines for official misconduct. Justices of the peace who engage in fraud, misuse their title for personal gain, or perform marriages that are fraudulent are explicitly prohibited from continuing in their role. These clear restrictions will help prevent potential abuse of office and restore the public's confidence in this office.
- **Section 3** outlines consequences for misconduct, including civil liability for damages caused by a justice of the peace's actions. This provision is important because it holds not only individual justices of the peace accountable but also their employers, ensuring that the entities responsible for appointing or managing them are equally held to account if they condone or encourage misconduct. This creates an added layer of oversight that will discourage poor behavior and unethical practices.
- **Sections 4 and 5** address the appointment process for justices of the peace. It updates the procedures for filling vacancies and ensures that town committees or town clerks can efficiently appoint justices in line with local needs and in a timely manner. This will allow municipalities to respond more quickly to changes and ensure that every town has a sufficient number of justices of the peace to meet its legal requirements.

We believe the bill should also incorporate attention to marriage fraud. Justices of the peace are often at the forefront of officiating marriages and ensuring that they have the necessary training to spot and report suspicious activity is essential for safeguarding vulnerable individuals. The last section of this bill establishes a working group to examine various facets of the justice of the peace system, including portability, oversight, and this valuable training. This forward-thinking approach will enable the state to address any systemic issues and continuously improve the justice of the peace program.

The role of justices of the peace is essential, and we must ensure that individuals in these positions are properly trained, prepared, and equipped to serve the public effectively.

Respectfully submitted,



Stephanie Thomas
Secretary of the State of Connecticut