CONNECTICUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN

Testimony Regarding Sections of Governor's S.B. 839 and S.B. 840, and Section 43 of H.B. 6375, Concerning the Office of the Child Advocate and the Office of the Healthcare Advocate

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Government Administration and Elections Committee
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Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone, and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. For the record, Jamey Bell is the Executive Director of Connecticut Voices for Children, whose mission is to promote the well-being of all Connecticut's young people and their families by advocating for strategic public investments and wide public policies. Before last fall Ms. Bell was a legal aid lawyer for 26 years, advocating to improve the child welfare and health care systems for Connecticut's residents. Sharon Langer is a Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices, specializing in health care programs and access, and prior to that she was a long-time legal services lawyer concentrating in health law.

I. Connecticut Voices for Children strongly opposes the proposed changes to the Office of the Child Advocate contained in S.B. 839 and Section 43 of H.B. 6375. It is imperative that the autonomy of and funding for the Office of the Child Advocate be maintained. The Governor's proposal to change the Child Advocate's statutory mandate to one "Child Advocate" position located within the Office of the Attorney General would fatally impair the state's independent oversight, investigation and policy advocacy capabilities on behalf of its endangered children. The Child Advocate's combination of investigation, monitoring, and policy analysis and advocacy is unique, and could not be replaced by any existing governmental or non-profit organizations.

Particularly troublesome are the elimination of the requirements that the Child Advocate review both systems, facilities and procedures, *and* individual citizen complaints. These powers are unduplicated in the state, and are critically important to the children who rely on independently monitored and accountable systems for their protection. It is likewise incomprehensible that the bill proposes to eliminate the requirement that the Child Advocate report to the General Assembly and the Governor annually. Without such regular and independent reporting on the systems impacting children's lives, policy-makers will lose a crucial source of information necessary to inform their work. Finally, the elimination of the requirement that the Governor select the Child Advocate from a list of candidates prepared by the Advisory Committee, instead allowing the Governor to select any person of the Governor's choosing, would fundamentally undermine the independence of the Child Advocate's office, and could have no articulable countervailing benefit.

CT Voices for Children regularly collaborates with the Child Advocate on initiatives to improve children's lives, including, most recently, working to stabilize children's educational placements while in out of home care, and advocating to make both the judicial and health care systems more comprehensive and responsive to children's developmental needs. The Child Advocate's hybrid

ability to be the outsider with an insider's access to information, facilities and policy makers makes their work and policy recommendations, and their value-add in collaborative work, as strategic, realistic and effective as possible. Particularly during a time when, because of the pervasive economic crisis, underlying social and financial supports for families may be in flux or imperiled, we urge you to maintain the Office of the Child Advocate as an independent oversight and monitoring arm, to help ensure that the systems which affect children's lives are appropriate, accountable and cost-effective.

II. Connecticut Voices strongly opposes S.B. 840, and Section 43 of H.B. 6375, eliminating the Office of the Healthcare Advocate. The Office of Healthcare Advocate is among the top few of the most effective and important public offices, and this is wholly due to the office' independence, depth of expertise and analysis, strategic thinking, dedication, and hard work. The Office of the Healthcare Advocate, as it has evolved currently, is unique. The Office is a premier resource for health and insurance program information across the private and public spectrum, with deep and practical knowledge of laws, rights, procedures, policy and how these interact and play out *on the ground*. It is a consistent and responsible collaborative partner in all efforts to improve health care programs and access across the state, with an eye toward efficiency, comprehensive coverage, systemic improvement and quality. Connecticut Voices relies on the Office of the Healthcare Advocate to lead in ensuring that health care systems affecting our mutual constituencies are as integrated, comprehensive, consumer-friendly, accountable and efficient as possible.

It is also an organization that has one of the most effective *advocacy* arms that we have ever seen. It is commonplace for The Office of Healthcare Advocate to receive profuse praise from everyone who seeks assistance from it. We have personally had individuals whom we have referred there thank us for what they characterize as "life-saving" advice and help.

In short, the Office of the HealthCare Advocate, and its leader, Kevin Lembo, get the job done. The Office maintains a broad and deep knowledge of the issues, includes the right staff, publicizes and follows through on the availability of the service, and *delivers*. We respectfully request that you oppose the elimination of the Office of the Healthcare Advocate.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.