

**Testimony In Support of Senate Bill 1157: An Act Concerning Funding for
Legal Services and Judicial Branch Technology**

Sharon D. Langer, M.Ed., J.D.

Committee on Judiciary

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Dear Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and Members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am a Senior Policy Fellow with Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth and families.

I am here today to support S.B. 1157, An Act Concerning Funding for Legal Services and Judicial Branch Technology.

This bill will help stabilize the funding for the network of Legal Services programs that provide critically needed representation in civil legal matters to Connecticut's poorest children, youth and families.

The Legal Aid Network cannot rely on its major funding source – IOLTA (interest on lawyer trust accounts) due to its collapse in this economic downturn. Even with the additional funding envisioned by SB 1157, the legal offices will see their funding reduced by 10 to 15 percent.

Legal Services Programs provide a *unique* service to children with complex behavioral and medical needs, at-risk youth struggling to get out or stay out of the juvenile justice system, and low-income working families struggling to keep food on the table and a roof over their children's heads

I know of what I speak because for almost twenty years I was a staff attorney for Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS). The policy advocacy I engage in now at Connecticut Voices for Children is informed each and every day by my experiences and those of my former colleagues at CLS and the other legal aid programs who represent kids and families.

As you have heard from others today, the precipitous economic downturn has had a devastating effect on the funding for legal services programs. I know that my former colleagues, as well the Connecticut Bar Association, lawmakers and others are doing everything they can to prevent the decimation of this vital service.

I was employed by CLS during the last severe fiscal crisis when staff took furlough days, wage freezes, and watched as we lost many good lawyers. It took many years to try to repair the damage. Then - as now - my former colleagues are willing to share the financial pain in an attempt to save jobs and to maintain high quality representation of kids, youth and families. However, they urgently need the state to be a full partner in this undertaking.

Our most vulnerable families need this legal lifeline – now more than ever – when the economy is in freefall. They need qualified legal representation in family court, juvenile court, in hearings before unemployment appeals referees and special education hearing officers, and in many other venues. It will be terrible if the Legal Services Programs have to lay off more attorneys in the coming months and years.

Please ensure there is adequate state funding for legal services to poor kids, youth and families in our state.

Thank you.