



**The Appropriations Committee
Office of Consumer Counsel
Agency Budget Presentation
February 19, 2021**

Richard E. Sobolewski, Acting Consumer Counsel

Testimony of Richard E. Sobolewski

Good morning, I am Richard E. Sobolewski and have been the Acting Consumer Counsel at the Office of Consumer Counsel (OCC) since July 1, 2019. Prior to that, I have been employed in various positions within the OCC since 1986. Except for the expansion adjustments associated with the Governor's proposed Broadband Bill, the OCC proposed budget represents the status quo for the operation of the Office.

The OCC is the statutory advocate for the State's utility customers. We appear before State and Federal agencies and in the Courts. Most of our work is performed before the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Also as part of the OCC, we have the Office of State Broadband (OSB), where the OCC serves as the advocate for broadband related issues in Connecticut.

Since May 2019, there has been a large turnover in the staff at the OCC. At that time, all thirteen of the Office's employee positions were filled. Over the next eight months, five, well experienced staff members left the Office. The OCC lost nearly 40% of its staff is hard enough; but losing four-fifths of your legal staff and over 70 years of experience with the agency in utility regulation, energy, water, telecommunications and broadband policy made matters extremely difficult.

OCC was allowed to begin filling its job vacancies late in 2019. At the end of January 2020, Attorney Datres joined the OCC team. During the pandemic, the OCC continued to work to refill its vacant positions resulting in Attorney Cohen and Attorney Wiehl beginning in May 2020. Next Friday, a new Economist will join the OCC Staff, resulting in all employee positions outside of the Permanent Agency Head being filled.

STATUS QUO BUDGET

The proposed budget covers the estimated salaries and benefits associated with the full complement of the Office's authorized, thirteen employee positions. The OCC's Other Expenses are at the current budgeted level.

EXPANSION BUDGET

During the pandemic, with more people working from home and students taking classes remotely, the "great digital divide" has become more apparent. In response to the need to manage and improve, Connecticut's broadband availability, the Governor proposed the *Equitable Access to Broadband* bill.

In order to support the staff necessary to achieve the three primary goals of the legislation - making affordable high-speed broadband available for all, promoting economic development, and protecting consumers while reducing costs – the Governor's budget provides for 3 new positions. The proposed budget includes \$365,522 in FY 2022 and \$379,580 in FY 2023 associated with the expanded role of the Office of State Broadband. A separate list providing detailed documentation of the OSB's new responsibilities should the bill be enacted is attached. OCC does not currently have the resources employed to support the expanded OSB duties and responsibilities. The budget for the expansion is to fund the salary and benefits for two full-time staff positions consisting of a Research Analyst and a Staff Attorney, along with a more senior position to oversee the Office of State Broadband. Other expenses for these initiatives will be covered by the Office's existing budget.