



CONNECTICUT
LEGAL
RIGHTS
PROJECT, INC.

TESTIMONY OF KATHLEEN FLAHERTY, ESQ.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CT LEGAL RIGHTS PROJECT, INC.
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING
FEBRUARY 26, 2021

Regarding: HB 6439, AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR. in particular the budgets for the **Judicial Branch**, **Probate Court Administration** and the **Department of Corrections**

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

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Good afternoon. My name is Kathy Flaherty and I am the Executive Director of Connecticut Legal Rights Project (CLRP), a statewide non-profit agency that provides legal services to low income adults with serious mental health conditions. CLRP was established in 1990 pursuant to a Consent Order that mandated that the state provide funding for CLRP to protect the civil rights of DMHAS clients who are hospitalized, as well as those clients who are living in the community.

I have practiced law in this state for almost 25 years, exclusively as a legal aid lawyer representing low-income people in this state. We appreciate that the governor's budget proposal included level funding for Legal Aid in the **Judicial Branch** budget. I note for the record that all of our programs have experienced increased need as the global pandemic has affected Connecticut and made more people eligible for our collective services.

I am particularly concerned that the Governor's budget includes a proposal to cut millions of dollars from the **Probate Court Administration Fund**, as it characterizes the cut "to reflect projected cash flow needs." Certainly, reducing

state budget dollars by several million dollars will affect the court's cash flow, and not in a good way. Considering that the legal rights of people with disabilities, including CLRP's clients, are the subject of a growing percentage of the probate court docket, we believe that it is important for the final budget to adequately fund Probate Court.

People with mental health conditions often find themselves trapped in the criminal legal system because we live in a society that has chosen to criminalize behaviors related to poverty and disability rather than provide funding to meet people's most basic human needs. I encourage this committee to carefully examine the proposed budget of the **Department of Correction**, especially the "zero changes" in the dollars despite the planned closure of at least one, and likely several, DOC facilities. Back when this state closed two of the large state psychiatric hospitals in the mid-1990's, a promise was made to reinvest the savings into the community-based system of care. We all know that the state failed to keep the promise then, and continues to fail now. I will be back next week to talk about that. However, if the Department of Correction is going to **shut** facilities including Northern, it is incumbent upon someone to make sure that the state **invests** those dollars in community-based solutions, both upstream prevention to avoid interaction with the criminal legal system and re-entry so that people leaving custody can build successful lives in the community.