

**TO:** Senate Co-Chair Catherine A. Osten  
House Co-Chair Toni E. Walker  
Senate Ranking Member Craig Miner  
House Ranking Member Mike France  
Honorable Members of the Appropriations Committee

**FROM:** Charles K. Norris  
Probate Judge – Norwich Probate Court (Dist. #29)

**RE:** H.B. No. 6439 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending  
06/30/2023, and Making Appropriations Therefor

**DATE:** February 26, 2021

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Members of the Committee, my name is Chuck Norris, I have served as the Norwich Region Probate Judge for over ten years. I have also been a civil trial attorney for over 27 years.

Prior to my election as Probate Judge, it was my impression that the Probate Court was the place where people went to argue about wills and trusts. This is a common belief held by most lawyers and non-lawyers who ask me about what I do as Probate Judge.

Following my appointment, I soon learned that my opinion of the Court was far different than the reality I faced once I started hearing cases in the Norwich Court. I quickly learned that the Probate Courts are at times closer to a social services agency. I spend over 80% of my time in hearings addressing cases that have nothing to do with wills or trusts. An overwhelming majority of my time in hearings is spent with what I consider family issues, and cases involving people who need help. I can assure anyone that has not spent an extended time in a Probate Court, that their belief as to what happens in the Probate Court is mistaken. As the years progress, I find that even more time is spent dealing with matters, not traditionally thought to be “Probate” issues.

Before the COVID crisis, my typical day at the Norwich Court, may start out at the local hospital where I hold hearings regarding psychiatric patients, or people who might require a conservator to make medical decisions. I also attend hearings at nursing homes, or under some circumstances, at the home of a person who has a condition that may not allow them to attend a hearing at the Court. I also hold hearings at the Court.

Hearings are conducted on nearly a daily basis, with the issues ranging from changing a person’s name, appointing a guardian, terminating parental rights, performing adoptions, or dealing with any number of family issues. My typical week involves very few, if any, hearings for what most people would describe as a “typical” will or estate.

Norwich is not a wealthy City, and as a result, there are many needs. The Norwich Probate Court is involved in many of those needs, most of which center on matters involving children, the elderly, developmentally disabled and those in need of psychiatric help.

I would like to tell you a few examples of what we have done at the Probate Court and how the Court not only helps people but also saves costs for other state agencies.

One of the most frequent matters that I handle in the Norwich Court are Conservatorships. As I typically tell people, a Conservator is kind of like a Court mandated Power of Attorney, with a determination that the person conserved is no longer able to handle their own affairs. The appointment of a Conservator is done under many different circumstances, ranging from elderly people, to younger people struggling with mental health issues.

The request for a conservator can also come from many different people, or entities. I have had requests for a conservator made by relatives, hospitals, social service type agencies, and even municipalities.

In some situations, the person being conserved has a family member who can be appointed to handle their affairs. In many cases, the person does not have a family member. In most cases, the lack of court involvement would have disastrous results. In order to understand what transpires, I felt that a few typical examples might help.

A common situation that arises is a person who may be in a nursing home, with either no family, or family who either refuse, or are unable to help the patient. In some cases, the patient at the nursing home could live at home with a little help, instead of costing us all the monthly expense of a nursing home which can easily exceed \$12,000.00 per month.

In other circumstances we are called into the hospital to consider the appointment of a Conservator before the patient is discharged to a nursing home, so that the person is able to remain living in their home.

The primary goal in these situations is to provide as much independence as possible for the conserved person. Absent the Probate Court oversight and input, it is likely that the person would simply spend the rest of their lives in a nursing home because they have nobody to help them.

There are far too many people living in our community who simply do not have the family, friends, or support to help themselves find proper housing or healthcare. This can happen even when the person has plenty of financial resources but not any help. While the typical conservatorship involves an elderly person, the Probate Courts are often asked to get involved with people needing help in all age brackets and situations.

As Probate Judge with a local hospital that has a psychiatric unit, I oversee psychiatric commitments and taking care of the psychiatric patients after they are discharged from the hospital. The patients committed to the hospital are often also the subject of a conservatorship or some other court proceeding. It is the help of the Conservators and Guardians through the Probate Court that keep the person in the community and out of expensive inpatient care, while ensuring their independence as much as possible.

I would also like to take this opportunity to let you know about how the Courts have continued to operate during this COVID crisis. The Court has remained operating and functioning every single day regardless of the circumstances. I have continued to hold hearings at the hospital on a regular basis. In addition, we conduct hearings every day through the WebEx computer program. The virtual hearing process has allowed us to make sure that estates continue to be processed, conservators, guardians, and all other applications are up to date. The ability to make sure all the work is being done and the needs of the Community are met, is primarily due to the great staff that we have and their dedication to the job.

Although I was completely surprised as to what work was done by the Probate Court, I enjoy the opportunity to help the people who appear before me. As previously stated, although the name "court" is used to describe what we do, it is much more like a social service agency for those needing help while incapacitated or not able to handle their own affairs.

Without the Probate Courts, I do not know where many of these people would be. Absent the family to help, or the knowledge and capacity to handle their own affairs, many of these people would just be lost.

I thank you for your continued support throughout the years. I have touched on just a few types of matters we handle, and would be happy to answer any questions you may have now or at any time in the future.

Thank you again for your consideration