

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: Philip A. Wright Jr.
Probate Judge - Wallingford Probate Court (Dist. #17)
Administrative Judge, Central Connecticut Children's Probate Court

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

Members of the Committee, my name is Phil Wright. I am entering my 28th year serving the town of Wallingford as its Probate Judge. In those 28 years, I have also served the probate system in many capacities, including as chair and member of several committees of the Connecticut Probate Assembly as well as an officer of the Assembly. My two-year stint as the Assembly's President concluded last year. I am currently one of the three members of the probate system's Budget committee. I have also been blessed to be associated with the Central Connecticut Regional Children's Probate Court for 15 years, having served as its Administrative Judge for the past 12 years.

Although I have been proud to contribute to the probate system as well as serve the people of Wallingford and the Central Connecticut region for all this time, I have never been more cognizant of the essential role the probate courts play in people's lives than I have been in the past year. Most people think of decedent's estates when they consider the work of our system, but our most recent statistics show a significant drop in the percentage that estates represent in our workload. The case type which has increased significantly is conservatorships, and people under conservatorship are most frequently and directly affected by the restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these folks reside in skilled nursing or other congregate housing which have restricted visits, not only from family members but also from their court-appointed conservators and attorneys. In many cases, it has become increasingly challenging and costly for those court-appointed conservators and lawyers to maintain

contact with the individuals whose rights and well-being they are obligated to protect. But it has never been more important to provide that contact and oversight.

During the course of this pandemic, the number of children's matters has not risen. Rather than a fact to be celebrated, for some of us it is a cause for concern. A significant number of the children's cases in our courts originate from the observations of teachers, social workers and other school-based professionals. We know there are many schools not yet engaged in full time in person learning, and we know as well that DCF workers for some time have greatly curtailed their in-home visits. I certainly fear a significant increase in our children's matters as this virus abates and our institutions return to normal functioning. In the same way, many folks, especially but not limited to the elderly, have been isolated in their own homes during this time. We know that isolation can be a cause of depression as well as a curtain which hides mental health issues from friends and family.

Most important for your consideration, unlike so many entities, the Probate Courts have never been closed during these trying times. Even when the municipal buildings which typically provide space for our courts have been closed to the public, we have continued to function through the dedication of judges and our staff. Although we have been legally relieved by Executive Order of the obligation to conduct hearings within the usual statutory time periods, we have continued to do the essential and often emergency work that we are morally obligated to do. Could I tell the family of a young man at Gaylord Hospital who is suffering from a traumatic brain injury that we can appoint someone to help make treatment decisions for him when the virus is under control? How could I explain to a family member of an elderly parent living alone who cannot manage his medications any longer that we will help when everyone is vaccinated? What about the patient being held in the psychiatric unit at Masonicare Health Center who wants a hearing to determine whether she should be released from that locked facility? How about the child who is being poorly cared for, if at all, by a parent suffering from a substance use disorder? Or the intellectually disabled child about to turn 18 who needs a guardian appointed to assist in medical and academic decision-making? These are examples of real cases that I deal with every week, and every probate court deals with them as well. Some judges mask up and attend to these matters in person, others conduct hearings via videoconference, but all of them have been doing their jobs without fail. Many conduct hearings from homes or offices if the building which houses the court is closed.

I know that Judge Streit-Kefalas, our Probate Court Administrator, has recently provided you with her Biennial Report which describes in great detail the wonderful value the Probate Courts represent to our state financially. Every dollar invested in the Probate Courts saves Connecticut \$111. We are the safety net's safety net, saving the State of

Connecticut an estimated \$1.5 billion every year. We are struggling to provide the constitutionally mandated representation, increasing by 5% each year, to which our parties are entitled. Please support our courts, our judges and staff, as well as the conservators, guardians and attorneys who provide direct services to our indigent parties by fully funding the Probate Administrator's budget request.