



State of Connecticut
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STATE CAPITOL
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106-1591

REPRESENTATIVE SUSAN M. JOHNSON
49th DISTRICT

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MEMBER
ENERGY AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE
FINANCE COMMITTEE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

TESTIMONY

RE: House Bill 5148 An Act Concerning Funding For the Judicial Branch

I am Representative Susan Johnson, and I represent the 49th House District of Windham of which includes Willimantic. Last fall the Governor vetoed the implementer legislation that left the Judicial Branch without the necessary funds to provide additional financial support for civil legal services to low income people. The Governor's veto also caused Judge Quinn to recommend closing a number of court houses and libraries throughout the state. House Bill 5148 corrects these serious problems, and I fully support this legislation and thank the committee for proposing it.

As mentioned, I represent the Town of Windham which includes Willimantic. Windham is the urban center of Northeast Connecticut, and by any measure is one of the poorest districts in the State of Connecticut. A few years ago, because of the great need we have in our community, a new state of the art Juvenile Court house was built in our town. This court is large enough for attorneys and their clients to have places to meet privately. Unless HB 5148 is enacted this new court house will be abandoned, and the juvenile court will be moved to the Valley Street Superior Court in Willimantic which includes the local law library used by many local citizens and lawyers.

Those who need to use the civil court or law library will be left to travel to Putnam which is a 45 minutes to an hour drive away from Willimantic. Putnam has a law library and to move the Willimantic law library to Putnam would not be the best use of the materials that now serve the Windham area community.

Additionally, having court proceedings in Putnam would be a hardship on those Windham Attorneys and especially on their clients who would have to pay for their lawyers additional travel time all the way to Putnam. In fact, the Rockville and Norwich Superior Courts are closer in time and distance to Willimantic than the Putnam court house is.

Five years ago you authorized then Probate Court Administrator James J. Lawlor to follow through on his plan to expand the children's probate court to five new regions beyond New Haven. The children's court is commonly considered to be the best thing to happen to our probate court in 300 years. When Judge Lawlor came to decide where to locate these regional courts, he did not hesitate to place one in Willimantic in the Town of Windham. Judge Lawlor, who lives in Waterbury, readily understood the need for a court in Willimantic. The same may be said for the Superior Court. It is not in anyone's best interests to move the Superior Court away from Willimantic, where it was wisely located by the State of Connecticut so many years ago.

I also support the increased fee schedule so that legal services can continue to serve the low income population of Windham. A loss of this funding would seriously diminish the legal services we all know are currently not adequate to serve the low income population of our state. As an attorney, a former long time employee of Connecticut Legal Services and advocate for senior citizen medical benefits, I can readily attest that the services which are provided to the low income population are extremely vital and valuable to those who are fortunate enough to become legal services clients. There are so many poor people and so few advocates that any additional cuts in services would be devastating to the low income community, which is already being devastated by the decline in our economy.

My sincere thanks to the committee members for taking the time to listen to me, and I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.