



Rep. Willis toured the new Litchfield County Courthouse construction site on Field Street in Torrington

As a legislator who has been supporting and working toward the construction of a new Litchfield County Courthouse in Torrington for many years, it was exciting to see the building taking shape. This \$81.45 million project will create over 1,400 construction-related jobs and bring all of the courts under one roof to better meet the needs of our citizens. Building construction is on schedule and completion time is planned for the Fall of 2016.

### NEWS BRIEFS

#### HELP FOR OUR RETIRED MILITARY

A new law fully exempts federally taxable military retirement pay from the state income tax. The exemption applies to federal retirement pay for retired members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Army and Air National Guard. (PA 15-244, § 65, effective upon passage and applicable to tax years beginning on or after January 1, 2015)



#### GOOD NEWS FOR CONNECTICUT'S ECONOMY

Connecticut continues to add jobs bringing the state unemployment rate down to 5.4%. This is the lowest rate that Connecticut has seen since May of 2008. The unemployment rate in the state is now comparable to the national rate. At this time last year, the unemployment rate was one full point higher, at 6.4%. Over the year, the state has grown 30,600 jobs – the largest annualized job growth since July 2000.

State Representative

# Roberta B. Willis

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## GIVING TOWNS MORE SAY IN ADJUSTING THEIR SCHOOL BUDGETS

Since the state first implemented a Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR), school enrollment numbers have steadily declined. The rigid requirement that towns spend the same amount (or more) on education than they did the year before was creating a disincentive for towns to deliver education efficiently and collaboratively. This year we offered flexibility to towns with low rates of poverty that are experiencing declining enrollment. These towns can now set an education budget down to 3% below their MBR. The top 10% of our state's highest performing districts are now exempt from MBR.

## REDUCING REQUIRED TESTING IN SCHOOLS

Testing of students has become excessive in our public schools. Students are required to take too many standardized tests and valuable instructional hours are being lost preparing for those tests. This past legislative session we eliminated the Smarter Balanced Assessment exam for high school students — that was a good start. For the 2015-2016 school year, the SAT will be used and will be free for all Connecticut students.



But, Connecticut must continue moving forward to improve testing.

## SUPPORTING FAMILY CAREGIVERS

This year I was proud to co-sponsor The CARE (Caregiver Advise, Record and Enable) Act. It is a common sense solution that will help the nearly 500,000 family caregivers in Connecticut as they help their older parents, spouses and other relatives to remain in their homes.

Family caregivers will now be recognized when their family member goes into the hospital, informed when they will be discharged and given the instructions they need to safely care for them at home.

This sends a clear message to Connecticut's family caregivers, that we value their efforts and understand the important role they serve in helping their loved ones live at home.



*Rep. Willis announcing the creation of the Student Loan Bill of Rights*

## ADDRESSING THE COST OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION

Our college students should graduate with aspirations, not buried under debt. Sixty-four percent of college graduates in our state have student loan debt. This year, the legislature took several steps to address the increasing cost of higher education.

Connecticut became the first state in the nation to create a Student Loan Bill of Rights, which establishes an Office of the Student Loan Ombudsman. This office will: regulate student loan servicers, compile data on borrower complaints, develop a financial literacy education course for students, and will help student borrowers and their parents navigate the loan process.

In an historic step toward increasing college affordability, the Connecticut Higher Education Supplemental Loan Authority (CHESLA) has announced that it will offer its lowest fixed interest rate yet at 4.95%, down from its current rate of 6.75%. This rate is also significantly lower than the Federal PLUS loan rate of 6.84%.

## PROTECTING CONSUMERS

We took a necessary step in protecting Connecticut residents, particularly the elderly, from electricity providers who offered a very low introductory rate that increased rapidly within a few months. This



law protects residential ratepayers from predatory variable rate contracts charged by electric suppliers. This makes our state the first in the nation to enact these protections. Competitive electric suppliers must now give their customers a 60-day notice of the end of their contracts. Suppliers cannot charge these customers a termination fee and must allow customers who want to switch to standard service the ability to do that within 72 hours.

## IMPROVING PUBLIC SAFETY

As a result of a string of high-profile police shootings that attracted media and public attention, states including Connecticut, are moving to address concerns about strained relations between the police and our communities. We passed a new public safety law that will provide increased protections for both law enforcement officers and those they serve. Among some of the key provisions of the law: Police will now receive training in 1) the proper use of physical force; 2) using and retaining the records of body-worn recording equipment (body cameras); and 3) cultural competency, sensitivity, and bias-free policing. Another key component of the bill includes providing funding for municipal police departments to purchase body cameras.



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