

Good evening, members of the budget committee and Mr. Genuario. My name is Marianne Arancio Stilson, and I am the Chief Clerk of the New Milford/Bridgewater Probate Court and the Vice President of the Clerk's Association.

I want to welcome the Governor's Office of Policy and Management to the Budget Committee Meeting this evening but I must respectfully ask where have you been for the twelve years that I have been an employee of the probate court system? Is the Governor aware that there is an entire group of non-State employees who serve to help the citizens of the State of Connecticut in times of need, trouble and worry who are some of the lowest paid in both salary and benefits of any agency in the State or for that matter, than some working at McDonald's or Burger King? Does OPM know or care that these employees should have been state employees years ago just by the virtue of the vital responsibilities that the clerks have performed for its residents all these years? Does OPM know that while the staff of the courts have ridiculous salaries and benefits, the salaries and number of employees at probate administration continues to grow? If this change was supposed to be to cut costs, why is probate administration growing and the courts and their employees decreasing? Why didn't judicial merge all of the probate courts children's matters into Superior Court? The creation of our systems children's courts has cost the probate system and the tax payers a lot of money every year. Where is the cost savings there?

According to the Governor, overlapping government will be looked at this year; will this overlapping jurisdiction between the probate court and the superior court be looked at and finally addressed? We invite the Governor's Office of Policy and Management's Labor Relations Unit to negotiate with representatives from the clerk's association as soon as possible. There is a ground swell among probate employees to either hire legal representation or vote on a union to represent us. Can't we reach a resolution through good faith negotiations? I hope so.

The State of Connecticut has been saving money on the backs of the clerk's of the courts since the beginning of the system. We are finally asking for a fair break. We remained quiet during the legislative process as to not muddy the waters for the system as a whole but we were never kept in the loop or asked our opinion when negotiations turned to the clerks. We have been told for two years now that no clerk will lose their job and that we would not lose any of the benefits we currently have negotiated with our judges so, we remained silent. Since many of us live in fear of losing our jobs on a daily basis because we work at the pleasure of judges, we remained silent. I can assure you, we have plenty to say. We have never been placed on any Committee that will decide our fate but have always been turned to when information is needed to help someone else in the system.

We have had employment agreements with our judges and those employment agreements were the basis for us leaving our past employment and coming to work for the probate court system. We are required as a group to have an expertise in probate law, demonstrating it and teaching it not only to pro se parties, but to lawyers on a daily basis.

We have been the watchdogs for those who can not speak for themselves under conservatorships or mental retardation. We are the ones who insure that the laws of the State are followed on a daily basis. We were told in November that during negotiations up in Hartford, that 20% of us would be without jobs if we were made State employees. As a result they did not go any further with that negotiation. I can assure you more that more than 20% of us will be without jobs either by the process of an election or by the number of employees this committee will propose for each remaining probate court.

I was a State of Connecticut Employee from April, 1994 to January, 1999. I worked for the Danbury Superior Court for those years. I went through the entire negotiation process with my judge. I was told repeatedly that it was the same retirement package and so with only three months left to vesting, I left my job to become the Chief Clerk for the New Milford Bridgewater Probate Court. It wasn't until June of that year when Jim Schnell called me up and asked me what 595257 was, that I realized that I was not in Kansas anymore. I have been fighting that misrepresentation of my benefits ever since. This is the type of system we have lived with for years. Although we work at the request or pleasure of our judges, most of our judges will be reelected and will be continue to work for them. Why should our employment package with our judge change? I believe that any new policies should be for new hires only or if a current employee is now making or receiving less than a new hire. We have lived with misinformation, lack of benefits and appropriate salaries for some and a sense that the only ones that ever mattered were the judges. This was even more evident when we realized that retiring judges would get four years added to their pensions regardless of their years as a judge but we were getting nothing. Meanwhile we were the ones on the front lines everyday, we were the ones who had to learn the law, we were the ones who wrote the majority of the decrees and we were and still are the backbone of the probate court system. I must repeat that, the probate COURT system. All the other courts in this State have the luxury of being State employees except us. Even the employees at the Department of Motor Vehicles are State employees. I have to shake my head. I might add I have done that a lot lately. We should be State employees. We have been told by our judges that we are the probate court system and that without us, there would be no system. I can personally tell you that when the probate judge for the Governor's home town of Brookfield became ill, it was me that he called, not my judge to ask that I take over his court and run the day to day operations in addition to my own court while he was ill and also help him hire and train his new clerk in his absence.

Unfortunately, Judge Reinan passed away but I continued to oversee his court and my judge became the acting judge for that court until the special election and the new judge took office. What does that tell you about us? It should speak volumes.

We have been told over and over again that this is about saving money. I have to say to you, who is watching probate administration and their cost savings? When Linda Dow, our Chief Council who we loved, left us at Probate Administration it took two attorneys to replace her. When David Salzman, Probate Administration's finance person who we loved, left us it took an accounting agency and still does and now a new finance person to replace him. Although some employees retired with the last retirement package or were let go as budget savings, more have been hired at larger salaries. I like most of my colleagues, was shocked at the salaries posted on the internet for employees at probate administration who also have the luxury of receiving all the benefits of State employees. This is an agency, probate administration, that is in existence to support the courts and they receive more than the employees of the probate court system itself? They are State employees and we are not. What is wrong with this picture? We have really been fools for so many years. When a position comes up for hire at probate administration, we do not even know about it until a new person has been hired and introduced at the next probate seminar.

We have remained loyal to our positions because it is a system that we love and we feel that that we are performing a vital service for the citizens of this great State, but we are being taken advantage of. We have hoped for years that with probate change, someone would realize that we needed to be State employees and act accordingly. We are an agency like any other State agency and should be treated as such. So far, no one has stepped up to the plate.

Ending on a positive note, I want you to know that I personally feel a great sense of accomplishment knowing that I helped make the probate court a better system on a daily basis. It

is a pleasure for me to work for my judge and the knowledge that I helped so many in my twelve years of service is extremely rewarding. I know my fellow colleagues feel the same way.

The legislature has decided to overhaul and rebuild a great piece of machinery – the probate court system. In an effort to modernize and streamline the new probate court system, they are stripping away some parts they think are not needed anymore but these parts, these gears, these cogs, these ball-bearings are exactly the things needed to make the whole system work. We clerks are not superfluous parts, we are the dedicated career employees who make this system run smoothly – don't throw us away.

Thank you for your time.