



Students Get Involved in Legislative Process

By Tracy Gordon Fox
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Hartford, CT - Poised in her business suit and prepared with her research, Kara Zarchin '18 adjusted her microphone in a hearing room at the Legislative Office Building in Hartford and began her testimony.

She spoke to state representatives and senators on the legislature's Committee on Children in support of Senate Bill 397, which would create an independent ombudsman for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families. The ombudsman now works under the commissioner of the department.

"As long as it's located within the DCF, and is a part of the DCF commissioner's office, the Office of the Ombudsman can be neither independent nor impartial," Zarchin said. She added that the ombudsman's brochure states the office is charged with investigating complaints on "the commissioner's behalf."

"But who is investigating complaints on the children's behalf?" she asked.

As part of a yearlong course and internship with the Center for Children's Advocacy, Zarchin and several other students testified before various committees at the state legislature earlier this year. They weighed in on legislation that would affect children, ranging from the ombudsman bill to safe haven laws that allow parents to relinquish newborn infants with no questions asked.

When the students testify, they have only three minutes to state their cases, speaking in hearing rooms that are sometimes packed with legislators, media and members of interest groups and the public. They must also be prepared to answer questions from members of the legislative committee.

Martha Stone, founder and executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy, said testifying before the legislature gives law students real-world experience with an emphasis on honing their arguments quickly.

"Very few students get that opportunity to be part of the legislative process," she said.

The students testify in support of bills initiated by the Center for Children's Advocacy, or they testify—in favor or opposition—on bills proposed through other channels.

The legislature hears and respects their voices, said state Rep. Diana Urban of Stonington, who co-chairs the Committee on Children. She said, for example, the ombudsman issue is one the committee would consider, depending on budget constraints.

She noted the research Zarchin brought to the table suggests the current arrangement fails to meet the national best practice guidelines for ombudsmen.

"Clearly this is an area we are going to be taking a deep dive," Urban said during the Jan. 7 hearing. Her co-chair, state Sen. Len Suzio of Meriden, told Zarchin her testimony was "impressive and convincing."

Some students who take the course will go on to become lawyers who advocate for children, and others will go on to practice in other fields. No matter where they wind up practicing, "it is really important for the law school to participate in the fabric of the community," Stone said.

Beyond testifying before the legislature, a requirement for the course, students assist the center's legal staff in cases involving child

abuse and neglect, special education, and medical and mental health care.

"It's pretty intense and emotional," Stone said.

Zarchin said it was her first time in the state Legislative Office Building and it had an impact on her.

"Just being part of the legislative process, it was humbling, moving and inspiring," she said. "I want to do more in that regard."

Emile Dajer-Pascal '17 testified in favor of a House bill that would give caretakers who have taken in infants under safe haven laws for more than 30 days the right to participate in a removal hearing if the DCF decides on other placement for the child. Dajer-Pascal said the bill offers more stability for the infant.

"It was a really cool experience and you feel like you're making a difference," Dajer-Pascal said.

Taylor Hansen '17 testified on behalf of a bill that would remove all youth below the age of 18 from the adult prison system.

"You get this feeling like my voice actually does matter," Hansen said of her testimony.

Jonathan Lee Anderson '17 sent written testimony to the education committee about the need for universal preschool. Patricia Jackson '18 presented testimony regarding restraints and seclusion of students by school employees.

"Public service is not the most fun place to be. We need people who are bright and articulate," Urban said. "The UConn students who come here are amazing."

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