

DEPARTMENT OF THE PUBLIC ADVOCATE
TESTIMONY
Testimony by Public Advocate Ronald Chen
Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee
May 1, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the Department of Public Advocate's budget proposal. I know this is a tough budget for tough times, and I appreciate the committee's time here today to discuss our budget in more detail. I will be brief.

First, I would like to publicly thank Governor Corzine and the Legislature's support of the department. As the statute envisions, we have a broad mandate to work on behalf of people with disabilities, the mentally ill, consumers, children and the elderly, and I can assure you the department is working hard to meet those responsibilities as set forth by the Legislature.

To meet our statutory mandate, the Department has proposed a budget of \$19.4 million. The legislation re-establishing the Department of Public Advocate became effective in January and the office officially opened in April, so let me put these numbers into perspective:

- \$14.2 million of the proposed budget is for flat funding of existing functions within state government that have been transferred to the department: including Rate Counsel, formerly Ratepayer Advocate; Mental Health Advocacy, Corrections Ombudsman, Ombudsman for Institutionalized Elderly and the Office of Dispute Settlement, and the Office of the Child Advocate.
- \$5.2 million is for new departmental functions provided for in the broad statutory authority reestablishing the department, including staffing the Divisions of Citizen Relations, Elder Advocacy, Public Interest Advocacy, Mental Health Advocacy and Advocacy on behalf of the Developmentally Disabled.
- The \$5.2 million cost for the Department's new and expanded responsibilities is significantly less than the \$6.4 million that was estimated by the Office of Legislative Services shortly after the legislation was passed and signed into law.

I know these are not easy times for the Governor, the Legislature or the public, but I can assure this committee that we have scrubbed the numbers forwards and backwards to find all potential cost savings and efficiencies.

To achieve significant cost savings, I am pleased to advise this committee that at the outset, we are achieving significant economies in administrative costs. We recently signed an agreement with the Department of Treasury under which Treasury will provide our Department with all our fiscal, human resource and technology service needs.

We saw no need to reinvent the administrative wheel when the services we needed already existed within state government. This shared services agreement means that other than an Office Manager to serve as our liaison with Treasury, we do not anticipate hiring any new fiscal, human resource or technology staff. Under this arrangement, we are ensuring that with limited funds in this difficult fiscal time, we will devote our resources to meeting our core responsibilities under the statute.

We also are taking the steps needed to assume, by July 1, responsibility for the existing functions that were moved into the Department under the statute. At the same time, we are cognizant of the fact that under the legislation you enacted, our statutory responsibilities are significantly greater, and go far beyond those existing functions.

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We are prepared to meet the charge you set forth for us. I also am confident that by consolidating these new duties with existing advocacy functions, we will be able to achieve efficiencies and do the job you have directed us to do.

As we have started our work, I have taken the opportunity in these past weeks to consult with a broad range of organizations and individuals in New Jersey. We've met with, leaders of the business community, organizations and individuals on both sides of the issues surrounding development, groups that represent individuals with developmental disabilities or mental illness, and advocates for the elderly. And I've had the opportunity to meet with many of you.

In several areas, our work is well underway. We have undertaken a study of the use eminent domain for private development, and this work is ongoing. I look forward to sharing our findings with you in the next few weeks.

We weighed in on the proposal to merge PSEG and Exelon because we don't believe the proposal, as it stands now, would benefit New Jersey consumers. I view public education to be a critical part of the work the Department must undertake. To that end, we did not just stop at filing a brief in the PSEG/Exelon matter. We also prepared a Citizen's Guide to the proposed merger to help educate citizens about this complex proposal and why it would impact them. I've provided copies of this for you today, and it is also available on our website.

We've already initiated a dialogue with senior staff at the Department of Human Services on issues concerning individuals with developmental disabilities. We've also brought Liz Shea, formerly of The Arc of New Jersey, on board to help us develop and move an agenda that addresses the needs and concerns of this critically important community.

We also assisted the Office of the Child Advocate in preparing for amicus arguments on a case involving sibling rights in DYFS cases. Finally, we became involved in the issue of lead exposure, and the devastating health consequences that result, by providing amicus support to several communities who want the paint industry to help make New Jersey housing safer, particularly for children, who are at the greatest risk from lead poisoning.

And although most of our work as been organizational so far, one of our top priorities is to get the Division of Citizen Relations up and running, so that citizens of New Jersey have a reliable and effective way to bring concerns and problems to the Department so we can help resolve them.

We know this is one of our core functions, and one of our most important, and we plan to do it right. I'd like to talk with each of you further about how we can assist the constituent relations staff in your local offices. I hope that each of you, and every member of the Senate and Assembly, will consider my department a resource as we all work toward serving the public interest.

Let me conclude by saying that I am pleased by the progress our department has made during these initial weeks of operation. I appreciate the opportunity I have had to meet and talk with many members of this committee over the past few weeks and months. I look forward to working with you as we move forward in re-establishing the Department of the Public Advocate and undertaking the mission that the statute has given us.

I look forward to answering any questions you might have about the budget or any other matter.