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## Rell's Proposal To Eliminate Consumer Counsel And Health Care Advocate Won't Save Money

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Today the state House of Representatives votes on the reappointment of Kevin Lembo, the state health care advocate. His reappointment is not in question, but his agency's future is.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell has proposed eliminating his office as well as the Office of Consumer Counsel.

The Courant has supported many of the governor's ideas for merging departments and commissions whose responsibilities overlap. But these two offices are exceptions. They have proved their worth in defending the interests of consumers against powerful insurers and utilities. And they have saved utility ratepayers and insurance customers billions of dollars.

But there's another reason the governor's proposal doesn't make sense: It wouldn't save money.

The state does faces a huge challenge in paying its bills with fast-dwindling income. It is understandably searching every pocket for change. Some pockets, however, should be left alone — including those that provide money for these two agencies and for a fund that compensates victims of crooked lawyers.

*CONNECTICUT'S CLIENT  
SECURITY FUND*

is a voluntary trust started by lawyers nearly

a decade ago to compensate clients cheated out of their money by their lawyers. About \$13 million has gone to victims who were unable to recover their money in other ways.

The legislation that created the trust fund explicitly stated that the modest yearly fees paid by the 30,000 practicing lawyers in Connecticut were "not to be co-mingled" with other money. But the state is taking \$2 million of the \$7.8 million fund to help balance its budget. And there is \$5.8 million in pending claims.

Just as confounding as this fee grab is the state's plan to retire the two offices that bird-dog the insurance and utility industries.

### *THE OFFICE OF CONSUMER COUNSEL*

sticks up for utility ratepayers when they are threatened with rate increases. The office is paid for not by state taxpayers but by the utilities, through a fee assessment that they pass on to ratepayers. Consumer Counsel Mary J. Healey estimates that her office, which has a yearly budget of \$3 million, has saved ratepayers \$4 billion in six years.

The governor wants the state attorney general to take over the consumer counsel's duties. But under Senate Bill 840, which eliminates the consumer counsel's office, there may be no savings. Utilities would continue to be assessed fees, but that money would now go to the attorney general's office instead of to the consumer counsel's.

The only change would be to rename the "Consumer Counsel and Public Utility Control Fund" the "Attorney General and Public Utility Control Fund."

### *THE OFFICE OF THE HEALTHCARE ADVOCATE*

says it saved claimants \$5.2 million on 1,200 cases last year alone by sticking up for insurance customers denied coverage or reimbursements.

The agency has a modest budget of \$1 million yearly, paid for not by state taxpayers but by a fee assessed on insurers. Under the same Senate bill, the office would simply be eliminated, along with all its advocacy work. Insurers would no longer be taxed to support the office.

The only way this elimination would save taxpayers money is if insurers passed the savings onto their customers, but there's no requirement to do so in the legislation.

These independent offices were created by the legislature because ratepayers and customers needed their own advocates against powerful entities. The agencies cost taxpayers nothing. So why get rid of them?

**Do you agree? Or disagree? Be heard with a Letter to the Editor: [www.courant.com/writeletter](http://www.courant.com/writeletter)**

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