

Quarterly Report of Consumer Advocate for Q1 2024 (January–March 2024)

Quarterly Report of the 2024 Interim¹ Independent Consumer Advocate (“ICA” or “Consumer Advocate”) for the Metropolitan District of Hartford County (MDC)

(Q1 2024: January 1, 2024 – March 31, 2024)

Introduction and Note About Interim Status During Calendar 2024

This is the Interim Consumer Advocate’s first quarterly report regarding the work he performed during the first quarter of calendar year 2024 (January 1, 2024 – March 31, 2024) (“Q1 2024”). The Consumer Advocate for the 2022-23 term announced at the end of 2023 that he would not be seeking reappointment for the next term, which included all of calendar year 2024. Notwithstanding, given that there were no attorneys who applied for the Consumer Advocate position as of the end of 2023, I agreed with Consumer Counsel Claire E. Coleman (“Consumer Counsel Coleman”) and the District Counsel, Christopher Stone (“District Counsel”), that I would continue serving as the ICA in 2024 until a new ICA was appointed. Although the ICA was hopeful that applications would come forward or that a successor ICA would have been appointed by the end of Q1 2024, neither occurred. As a result, the ICA continued serving in this limited, interim capacity as of the end of March 2024.

The limited work that I did in Q1 2024 as Consumer Advocate is summarized in this report under the following categories: Transition to Successor Consumer Advocate and Legislation; Attendance at Integrated Plan Quarterly Meeting and Other Meetings of District Board and District Commissioner Committee/Bureau/Board Meetings; and Customer Complaints and Inquiries.

As a preface to this report, I wish to comment on the fact that the ICA did not do as much work this quarter as he had done in other quarters during 2022 and 2023. During Q1 2024—and indeed, for as long as I was able to continue serving as the 2024 ICA for whatever length of time required—I always anticipated that whenever the successor ICA was appointed, she or he would only be able to bill the total difference between the statutory cap for 2024 (\$50,000 until 2024 legislation was passed, thankfully), and the amount that I had billed during 2024 before her/his appointment. Bearing this in mind, in 2024 I tried only to address emergency situations with customers or comment on policy issues only if I saw them as needing more input from the ICA or fundamentally problematic with respect to customer fairness. My reduced billings for Q1 2024 (\$6,451.20) were a result of this, but they also were a result of my unavailability to do any more than what I did as the Interim 2024 Consumer Advocate. I was much less available to perform the ICA’s duties in 2024 in large part due to the increased attention that I was required to devote toward litigation matters involving my non-ICA clients. At bottom, I only was able to perform a *de minimis* amount of work when compared to the work I performed as ICA during prior quarters. Of course, I wish that I could have done more to be of service to the MDC’s customers in 2024, but I hope that my reduced billings for Consumer Advocate work during this quarter will only help to make the next ICA—once appointed—better equipped to perform her or his tasks.

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Transition to Successor Consumer Advocate and Legislation

A large portion of the work that the ICA did during Q1 2024 was intended to assist the Office of Consumer Counsel (“OCC”) and the MDC in finding and equipping a successor to take over the ICA position for the remainder of the 2024-2025 term. This work involved the ICA having to meet and communicate with the OCC and several District Officials in order to craft a strategy for how the ICA’s duties would be met during this interim period, while still preserving adequate resources for the succeeding ICA, if and when he or she was appointed. This work also entailed the ICA’s communicating with various attorneys and attorney associations about the nature of the ICA’s work, the ICA’s resources and means of providing legal services to MDC’s customers, and other information regarding the MDC’s legislative process.

A paramount issue to the ICA in his efforts to incentivize attorneys to apply for the ICA position was the issue of compensation. As he had communicated previously before Q1 2024, the ICA believes that given the obligations of the position and the number of customers served by the MDC, a statutory annual cap in the amount of \$50,000 for the ICA’s billed fees is unduly burdensome to the ICA. Thus, the ICA tried to help efforts to seek legislative amendments to the statutes which gave the ICA his or her authority, Connecticut General Statutes § 7-334a. Notably, Senate Bill No. 00336 (a/k/a Public Act 24-98), titled “An Act Concerning The Metropolitan District Of Hartford County’s Independent Consumer Advocate” (*available at <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2024/act/Pa/pdf/2024PA-00098-R00SB-00336-PA.PDF>*) (the “Bill” or “SB 336”), was introduced at the General Assembly.² SB 336 became the focus of the ICA’s work this quarter with respect to helping the OCC and MDC to appoint a successor. Accordingly, in advance of the March 6, 2024 Public Hearing on the Bill held by the General Assembly’s Committee on Planning and Development, the ICA researched relevant information, and he prepared and submitted written testimony in support of the Bill.³

Attendance at Integrated Plan Quarterly Meeting and Other Meetings of District Board and District Commissioner Committee/Bureau/Board Meetings

The ICA attended several regular and special meetings held by the District Board, the Board of Finance (BOF), the Water Bureau, and the Bureau of Public Works (BPW) during this quarter. In connection with attending these Board, Committee, and Bureau meetings held by the District Commissioners, the ICA reviewed the Agenda materials, staff communications, and relevant law.

Although the ICA was unable to attend the meeting in person due to his being out of the country on that date, the ICA remotely attended the MDC’s Integrated Plan Implementation Consent Order Annual Report Public Meeting held on March 14, 2024. In connection with preparing for this Meeting, the ICA conducted a limited review of the MDC’s records related to its Integrated Plan work performed during Q4 2023.

² The Co-Sponsors of the Bill were: Senator Derek Slap, Senator Matthew Lesser, Representative Kate Farrar, Representative James Sanchez, Representative Bobby Gibson, Representative Gary Turco, Representative Tom Delnicki, and Representative Tami Zawistowski.

³ My testimony can be found here: <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2024/pddata/TMY/2024SB-00336-R000306-Szerejko,%20Joseph,%20Independent%20Consumer%20Advocate-MDC-Supports-TMY.PDF>

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Customer Complaints and Inquiries

The ICA continued assisting as many customers with complaints and inquiries as he possibly could, which was difficult given his other client responsibilities and other constraints. That said, the ICA notes that he did the following in this regard:

- I communicated with and advised an East Hartford customer about his rights in connection with a leak adjustment request;
- I helped several customers from West Hartford with billing-related disputes;
- I assisted a Wethersfield customer regarding issues she was having with connecting a sewer lateral to her lot;
- I advised a Hartford customer pursuing a property damage claim about how the customer could seek relief with the District's staff;
- I communicated with a Hartford customer, a public adjuster, and an insurance claims investigator in order to facilitate the factual investigation and claims resolution processes surrounding the customer's claim for relief as to property damage sustained by sewer overflow incident; and
- I assisted a Windsor customer with a leak adjustment request.

Respectfully submitted,



Joseph D. Szerejko
Independent Consumer Advocate (Interim) for 2024