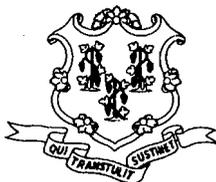


# State Of Connecticut

## GENERAL ASSEMBLY



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**Testimony of  
Leslie Gabel-Brett, Ph.D  
Executive Director  
Permanent Commission on the Status of Women  
Before the  
Judiciary Committee  
Monday March 20, 2006**

#### Re:

**H.B. 5821, AAC Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse Services That Are Gender Specific and Trauma-Informed**

**H.B. 5699, AAC the Implementation of Certain Requirements Protecting Children of Families with Services Needs**

**H.B. 5700, AAC Justice for All Children**

Good afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the committee. My name is Leslie Gabel-Brett and I am the executive director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of several bills that are before you today.

#### **H.B. 5821, AAC Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse Services That Are Gender Specific and Trauma Informed**

We strongly support H.B. 5821 because women and girls need services that are gender appropriate and culturally competent, and take into account their specific experiences, especially psychological trauma resulting from sexual or domestic violence. Our current systems for providing treatment to girls and women, whether through the juvenile or adult criminal justice systems, or through programs for people seeking behavioral health and substance abuse services, are not sufficiently integrated and rely too heavily on incarceration or other institutional responses when smaller, community-

based services would be better. In addition, some providers are not adequately trained to recognize and treat girls and women who are victims of trauma.

H.B. 5821 requires state funded programs to be more gender specific and “trauma-informed” and promotes the dissemination of “best practices” through implementation of a competitive grant program. Alyssa Benedict, an expert and trainer on this topic, explains that “gender specific systems and services are those that intentionally allow research, knowledge and competency on female development, socialization, risks, strengths, and needs to affect and guide all aspects of system design, system processes, service design and service delivery.”

A growing body of research and experience has demonstrated that girls and women need “gender-specific” services that take into account their particular experiences and developmental needs. For example, an overwhelming majority of girls and women who enter the criminal justice system have been the victims of sexual or domestic violence; in fact, the report issued by DCF pursuant to Special Act 04-05 notes that girls are three times more likely than boys to have been sexually abused by the age of 18. Girls who have been sexually abused are more likely to experience stress, depression and low self-esteem.<sup>1</sup> In addition, research demonstrates that girls and women are more likely to thrive in settings where personal relationships are valued and nurtured, and where cultural differences are also respected.

Treatment or responses that do not address the psychological consequences of trauma will not work, and may actually re-victimize the victims. If we do not invest in the necessary training and development of best practices for providing services to women and girls, we will waste state funding and waste the time and effort of those in treatment as they struggle to succeed in programs that do not work.

**H.B. 5699, AAC the Implementation of Certain Requirements Protecting Children of Families with Services Needs**

**H.B. 5700, AAC Justice for All Children**

We support H.B. 5699 and H.B. 5700 and believe they are important and related efforts to improve state responses to children in our juvenile justice systems. At the PCSW we focus on gender discrimination, but race discrimination is just as pernicious. Visit any of the detention programs for girls and you will find a disproportionate number of girls of color; the same is true for boys. H.B. 5700 would engage the Judicial Department, the Public Defender, DCF, the Department of Public Safety and community experts in a project to develop race-neutral criteria for detention of juveniles and to implement and evaluate at least one pilot project based on the new criteria. Such an effort is long overdue.

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<sup>1</sup> *Plan for a Continuum of Community Based Services for Adolescent Females Involved in the Juvenile Court System*, Department of Children and Families, December 30, 2004, citing various psychological research reports, p. 27

H.B. 5699 addresses the needs of children in families with service needs. As you know, these are children who are truant, have run away from home, or who have engaged in other misconduct. In many cases, girls become truant or run away from home because they are trying to escape domestic violence or sexual assault. Too often, they are later incarcerated for “status offenses” – that is, for violating a court order that required them to remain in school or stay at home. These are “lose-lose” situations for girls, and juvenile detention often leads them down a path to further harm and failure.

Last year, the General Assembly passed important legislation, P.A. 05-250, that prohibits the detention of a child solely for violating a court order and also directs the courts to seek the least restrictive alternative when issuing orders with respect to children from families with service needs. The bill before you today, H.B. 5699, would establish an Advisory Board to monitor our progress in implementing these new requirements, and to make recommendations to the Judicial Department and the General Assembly for improvement. We support such an effort, and urge the Committee and the Advisory Board, if created, to pay attention to the specific needs of girls in families with service needs.

Thank you.