



State of Connecticut

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STATE CAPITOL
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106-1591

REPRESENTATIVE ELIZABETH "BETSY" B. RITTER
THIRTY-EIGHTH DISTRICT

LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING
ROOM 4002
HARTFORD, CT 06106-1591
HOME: (860) 444-1700
CAPITOL: (860) 240-8585
TOLL FREE: 1-800-842-8267
FAX: (860) 240-0206
E-mail: Elizabeth.Ritter@cga.ct.gov

MEMBER
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
ENERGY AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

TESTIMONY ON SB 902, *AN ACT CONCERNING YOUTH WHO RUN AWAY* April 4, 2007

Good morning Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Elizabeth Ritter and I represent the 38th District, which includes the Town of Waterford and a portion of the Town of Montville. I am here to speak in support of SB 902 AN ACT CONCERNING YOUTH WHO RUN AWAY.

I want to thank the committee for raising this bill. This year, in particular, the legislature has intensified its look into the way we treat youths between the ages of 16 and 18, and this bill addresses a particular situation regarding youths in crisis.

The proposal will give the courts the ability to order a youth in crisis who has run away from their home and been determined to have done so without just cause to be subject to the control of the parents, guardian, foster parent or other custodian. Currently there is no provision for this determination to be reached absent other circumstances.

The need for this change became clear to me as I learned of the circumstances of a family in Waterford. Gary and Judy Meucci are here today and will be testifying. As a parent of daughters, a daughter, and a community member – I find their story heartbreaking. When the Meuccis' 16 year old daughter Heather ran away and informed them she was not intending to return, they went to the police and then the juvenile court. They filed a Youth in Crisis petition with the court and then were granted a motion for an evaluation of their daughter through the Probate Court. Heather was diagnosed with a Dissociative Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Secondary to Cult Abuse, but the Meuccis could not be granted a restraining order because no physical abuse was involved.

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The next months were a legal and emotional nightmare. The family was never able to get a restraining order against the family where their daughter was living. Heather spent time in psychological treatment facility and additional evaluations confirmed the diagnosis of a Dissociative Disorder; but on May 15th, 2006, the Meuccis watched their daughter get into a cab and leave home. She has not returned.

This story was plagued by the inability of the police and courts to act because of Heather Meucci's status as a Youth in Crisis. Heather was in the "gray zone" between the ages of 16 and 18. There was no provision in the law that would give a supportive, intact, loving family the tools to, at the very least, understand what was going on with their daughter. This bill is a step in that direction.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Most particularly, thanks to Representative Lawlor for his time meeting with this family and understanding their situation. I will be happy to answer any questions.