To: Members of the Judiciary Committee

From: Catherine Zeiner, Executive Director

Date: March 3, 2008

Re: HB 5722: An Act Concerning Protective Orders And Court Services for Crime Victims

Good afternoon members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Cathy Zeiner, and I am here to speak in favor of providing funding for a victim advocate in the new New London, Norwalk and New Britain Domestic Violence Docket Courts. I am the Executive Director of the Women's Center of Southeastern Connecticut, Inc. **We provide domestic violence services to more than 5,500 victims per year in New London County, including 2,000 in the New London court and 1,500 in the Norwich court.**

As you may know, the purpose of **domestic violence docket courts** is to **increase offender accountability while enhancing victim safety** through the aggressive investigation and prosecution of domestic violence cases. This is accomplished through a specialized team that includes a judge, prosecutor, family relations counselor, investigator, probation officer, and family violence victim advocate who understand the complex issues of domestic violence, and effective options for prevention, sanctions and treatment of offenders.

They identify the repeat offenders, the most severe first-time offenders, and the cases where the police have been called to the house multiple times. They work with **offenders** who have already completed batterer intervention programs and need monitoring to ensure that they **are in compliance with all of the terms of their sentences -- and especially, that the victim is safe, her or his rights are protected, and her or his voice is heard** throughout the process.

Benefits to the docket court approach include: 1) cases are heard sooner; 2) there is more consistent prosecution of theses cases as offenders are closely monitored; 3) it prevents repeat offenders from judge or prosecutor shopping; 4) victims feel safer and more confident to come forward; 5) there is better communication and accountability with DCF; and 6) it prevents the situations where cases have been dismissed because the trials have been delayed for as many as two years and the victim has left the area either out of fear or for other personal reasons. With a docket court, the cases are followed by the same judicial team, information is retained, and the offenders are known to the court, so cases are less likely to be dropped or inappropriately plead down.

I want to thank you, the Judicial Branch, and the Governor, for recognizing the effectiveness of this approach in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, Stamford and Waterbury, **and for responding to the critical need for these courts in New London, New Britain and Norwalk**, by providing the funding for the judges, prosecutors, investigators, and other team members for these new courts. **Unfortunately, in the**

eleventh hour of budget negotiations last year, the legislature pulled the funding for a victim advocate in these three new courts.

Without the services of a victims advocate, the docket courts cannot possibly accomplish their objective of enhancing victim safety. Inherent in these cases is the risk of future violence to the victim and her or his children, patterns which include victim fear and sometimes a reluctance to testify, issues of perpetrator accountability, restitution, and more.

The Family Violence Victim Advocate empowers the victims with respect to their safety and right to self-determination, from the time of arraignment and throughout the court process, by: safety planning with the victim; providing information about court processes; keeping victims apprised of court dates; accompanying victims to trials and sanction hearings; assisting victims in preparing impact statements; representing the victim's wishes in meetings of the docket team; advocating for protective orders when desired; assisting in applying for civil restraining orders, registering with the Department of Corrections Victim Notification Services, and applying to the Victim's Compensation Fund; and offering referrals to community services.

Because we are so confident that the docket court approach is the best way to handle the most difficult domestic violence cases and to protect victims in New London County, that **we have tried our best this past year to provide victim advocacy in the docket court without the state funding. Unfortunately, we have run up**

against some serious obstacles. The federal sources from which our regular family violence victim advocates are funded restrict the amount of work they can provide to docket courts. We increased the hours of our advocates, including making a part-time position full-time, with the hope that we would find other sources of grant funding to support these additional services. Unfortunately again, we have not been very successful. Informal feedback that we have received from potential funders has indicated that they believe it is the responsibility of the state government to fund these positions, as they have in the other five courts, so they will not approve grant requests from us for them.

We have increased our agency fundraising significantly in the past four years, but that has not even kept pace with the un-funded and under-funded portions of our other state and federal contracts. **It will be very difficult, if not impossible, for us to continue to provide any victim advocacy services to the docket courts without the funding from the state for the position.**

You have invested a lot of resources in domestic violence docket courts statewide, and they are making a difference. But, **without the victim advocates, victims are left out of the process, their rights are neglected, and their safety is compromised.** I am confident that that was never your, or the Governor's, intention during the last legislative session. This is your opportunity to remedy that situation, and **I respectfully request that you authorize the funding for victim advocates in the three new docket courts**.

Thank you.