



Women's Center of Greater Danbury, Inc.

2 West Street
Danbury, CT 06810
203-731-5200

Written Testimony of the Women's Center of Greater Danbury, Inc.

Melanie E. Danyliw, Director of Education & Training
Alex Lopes Massa, Director of Shelter Services
and some words from a former shelter resident

Raised Bill 5836 An Act Concerning Staffing at Domestic Violence Shelters

Submitted to Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor
and members of the Judiciary Committee

March 10, 2008

As the domestic violence agency providing services to victims in upper Fairfield and lower Litchfield counties, and as a CCADV member agency, we are submitting this testimony in support of 24/7 on-site staff coverage of domestic violence shelters. During the past fiscal year, the Women's Center helped 2,395 victims of domestic violence, including 77 women and children at Elizabeth House, our domestic violence shelter.

When a victim has made the decision to leave their abusive relationship – to break the cycle of violence – it is critical that we offer any support needed to sustain that commitment. If sheltering makes that step possible, our program needs to provide a safe and supportive environment where anxiety and fear are reduced so the victim can stay and begin the difficult transition to independence. Major factors contributing to a new resident's stress include the immediate need to tackle transitioning to independent living and adjusting to communal living. *How* a trauma survivor may process information can create significant complications. Our residents come to us in survival mode. It is not uncommon for victims to misperceive the level of threat of an event or a task and react disproportionately or inappropriately. This traumatic processing can happen over something as benign as misplacing keys or a delay in school opening or as significant as these situations or incidents that occurred at our shelter when no staff was immediately available on-site:

- being nine months pregnant and caring for four children under the age of seven
- a child breaking his finger in the door ... and you have no car
- fearing that your gang member abuser will find this shelter ... just as he found the others
- you and your small children being awakened to the deafening sound of the alarm system not knowing yet that it was triggered by wind rattling a loose window screen

Whether it is these very real crises or daily stressors, the presence of 24/7 on-site staff to calm the resident(s) and guide them through grounded options allows the safety and time our residents need to work on achieving safe and independent living arrangements.

These words from a former Elizabeth House resident, Marietta Hickey, attest to the need for on-site coverage as well as some less intangible achievements so fundamental to leaving domestic abuse:

Twelve years ago, I became involved with my abuser. In August 2006, he had broken my jaw in four places. He nearly killed me. From living in the shelter, I learned the abuse wasn't my fault. The women at the shelter loved me until I could love myself. The only unfortunate thing was lack of staff counseling for long periods of time. Night time hours are particularly difficult to get through without proper support available. Listening only to stories of other residents during those hours adds to your own depression.

During a brief period in FY 05-06, we were able to increase our shelter staff coverage to nearly 100% (because of funds accumulated from a loss of staff in the months immediately preceding that time.) Advocacy services to each resident increased from one hour per day to six and counseling services doubled

to two hours per day. As a direct result, a record four out of ten residents achieved safe, independent living *within three months*. Our sister programs report similar increases, averaging three times more provision of services than programs without 24/7 staffing.

These successes attest to the effectiveness of consistent, uninterrupted 24/7 support of domestic violence victims while these complicating factors argue for its need. The additional benefits of reduction in costs associated with police response, court support, emergency room or medical treatment, DCF intervention, and lost productivity at work heighten the financial efficiency of 24/7 staff shelter coverage.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.