

Good morning Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Gina O'Connell and I live in New Fairfield.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill Number 642, an act concerning the availability of victim advocates in all courthouses.

One year ago, I became unwillingly involved with the courts when my 5-year old daughter became the victim of a sexual assault by a 14-year old babysitter. As you can imagine, this was a tumultuous time in our lives. Clarity was fading and each day seemed to hold despair. When the investigative process began, it was difficult to know what to ask, when to ask it and of whom. Our rights, on behalf of my daughter were blurred. There wasn't anyone or any single source we could go to for guidance. While law enforcement and service agencies such as The Women's Center of Greater Danbury and Danbury Regional Child Advocacy Center were extremely helpful; their services were focused on getting my daughter the immediate medical and psychological help she needed as a result of the assault. The items outside of their realm are becoming more apparent as time goes on.

We were not privy to information from the investigation or the court proceedings, even when we asked to participate. We were dissuaded from seeing our daughter's videotaped testimony after multiple requests even though we were told we were entitled to it. We were allowed to appear at the perpetrator's sentencing and were grateful for the opportunity to deliver our victim impact statement. However, having gone through the harrowing exercise of reliving the nightmare of the assault, our plight fell on deaf ears.

Now that time has passed and my daughter is en route to a healing place, I've become interested in the litigious process. I've attempted to gain records which I'm told are sealed. I have little recourse at this point in time in an attempt to gain information which I should have been privy to a year ago. We were not aware of statutes, and aside from having a booklet to read, not aware of our rights. Without the assistance of a paid attorney, we didn't know what information we could obtain. We now face confusion and frustration on a daily basis while trying to piece our lives back together.

Today I appear before you, not seeking information for myself, and not looking for anything about my daughter's case to change, but to hopefully prevent this confusion and frustration from happening to a future victim and their family. One day, perhaps we'll live in a world where victim advocates will be an unnecessary function because there will be no victims. Today, however, the need for victim advocates is stronger than the laws that protect a perpetrator's rights. I implore you to consider instituting the role of victim advocates in all Connecticut courts, especially Juvenile Courts.

Thank you for your time, attention to my plea and for the opportunity to testify. I further thank you for your continued support for victims of crime. Please vote in favor of Senate Bill 642.