



Public Hearing Testimony

Speaker: Caitlin Mitchell

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WOMEN & FAMILIES CENTER
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Testimony of the Women and Families Center, Sexual Assault Crisis Services
Caitlin Mitchell, Prevention Advocate

HB 5591 AN ACT CONCERNING HEALTHY TEENS

Submitted to the Education Committee
Public Hearing, February 29, 2008

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischman, and other members of the Education Committee, my name is Caitlin Mitchell and I am a Prevention Advocate at the Women and Families Center Sexual Assault Crisis Services. The Women and Families Center is one of nine rape-crisis member centers of the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services. Our mission is to eliminate injustice through services that foster independence and empowerment for women and families who live in Middlesex and Greater New Haven Counties.

My job as Prevention Advocate is to work on preventing sexual violence before it happens, mainly through community education that targets young people. We teach about sexual assault and consent, healthy relationships, dating violence, sexual harassment, gender stereotypes, bullying, and other related topics—many of which may fall under the rubric of comprehensive sex education. We work mainly in middle schools and high schools throughout south central CT, often visiting high school health classes as guest speakers. So far this school year our Violence Prevention Program has provided over 300 programs to over 3000 young people at 35 different schools and community centers.

The work we do as educators gives us a unique perspective on the importance of funding for comprehensive sex education. We consistently notice that adolescents need more accurate and relevant information about sex and sexuality. At the same time, the attitude changes we see in students who participate in our programs show us that education really can have an impact.

Although adolescents sometimes learn about sex from responsible adults, more often than not they get at least some of their information from TV, music, and the internet. If messages from the media are not counter-balanced by accurate and age-appropriate information from other sources, young people are left with a picture that is skewed or even false. One example that sticks out in my mind occurred when I was working with a group of 7th and 8th grade girls at a middle school in Meriden, CT. A few of the girls surprised me with their television-based knowledge of sex-change operations and people who identify as transsexual. These very same girls lacked crucial information about their own bodies and development—they were unclear about why women menstruate, although they had begun to menstruate themselves. They were also under the impression that tampons are incredibly dangerous and cause cancer.

In other moments, we have found that the information young people get through the media is misleading or false, especially around the issue of sexual assault. Often, students learn about sexual assault from highly publicized real-life cases on TV in which the woman lies about being raped (for example, the Coby Bryant Case), or from Law and Order special victims unit, whose depictions of rape are highly sensationalized. Predictably, these kinds of programs leave some students with the false view that a woman who says she has been raped is probably lying, and that "real" rape is always an incredibly dramatic and violent act. What gets obscured is the fact that most sexual assaults happen in the home between people who know each other and are not reported, let alone lied about.

Whether it's from TV, music, or just from older siblings or peers, many young people are left with false ideas and stereotypes that put them at risk for making bad decisions about sex in the future, whether or not they are sexually active in the present. For example, we frequently encounter students who believe that if a person is raped while they are extremely drunk, it must be the their own fault because they chose to drink; or that if a woman dances provocatively or wears revealing clothing, she is asking to be touched or pressured sexually, regardless of what she actually says or wants; or even that "all girls resist at first," so that resisting physically or even saying "no" to sex should not be taken seriously. These are exactly the kinds of ideas that can lead to a sexual assault.

We support funding for the proposal for the grant program in **HB 5591 AN ACT CONCERNING HEALTHY TEENS** and encourage committee members to narrow the focus the monies to specifically support programs that provide comprehensive, age appropriate, medically accurate information about sexual health.

We believe that programs such as ours—and comprehensive sex education in general—can help change these kinds of attitudes. In one of our most widely used lesson plans, we educate students about the myths and facts of sexual assault, and provide them with an opportunity to think critically about an acquaintance rape scenario. We ask them to identify factors—such as alcohol, gender stereotypes, and false definitions of consent—that converged to cause the scenario, and to brainstorm ways of preventing acquaintance rape in their own communities. We place particular emphasis on defining and understanding consent, not as submission or silence but as an active, conscious, choice to agree. We also emphasize the idea that every person always has the right to say "no" to something that makes them feel uncomfortable, no matter what the context. In just a single class period, we have watched students change their views dramatically. After our program, most students come to a consensus that sex without consent is wrong, and that consent means communication and agreement for both people involved.

In closing, I just want to reiterate how strongly we at the Women and Families Center believe in funding for comprehensive sex education. We have seen first-hand both the need for comprehensive sex education, and the positive results that even a limited amount of sex education can bring. Finally, we are deeply invested in this issue because we believe that comprehensive sex education has the potential to help to prevent sexual assault in our communities.

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