



of Southeastern
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To: Members of the Judiciary Committee

From: Catherine Zeiner, Executive Director

Date: March 10, 2008

Re: HB 5836: An Act Concerning Staffing at Domestic Violence Shelters

Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Cathy Zeiner, and I am submitting testimony in favor of HB #5836 for the expansion of shelter services for victims of domestic violence. 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, and currently operate one of the only three (3) domestic violence shelters in the state with 24-hour paid staff.**

We have worked with victims of domestic violence for more than 30 years, but in recent years, **our long-time advocates have recognized a marked increase in the complexity of issues that our clients face.** To understand the problem better, we did a study of the survivors in one of our programs. In that study, **we documented that nearly three-quarters (3/4) of the women and one-quarter (1/4) of the children were dealing with a diagnosed chronic illness; three-quarters (3/4) of the women and one-half (1/2) of the children were struggling with a diagnosed mental illness; and more than half of the families were DCF-involved.**

Some specific examples of the clients, we recently served include:

- A 6-year-old boy who was hospitalized several times for trying to kill himself by running out in front of cars, and his 9-year-old sister who tried to hang herself from the banister,
- A 22-year-old woman whose boyfriend was incarcerated for attempting to murder her, but who still had to change her name and go into hiding to escape the threats from his family and his fellow gang members, and
- A 28-year-old immigrant who was coerced, and we suspect may have been trafficked, into the subculture around the casinos.



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Domestic violence is not a 9-to-5 problem, and ours is not a 9-to-5 job.

Our 24-hour staffed shelter has been a safety net for the most vulnerable victims in our state for a couple of decades, but I need you to know that **we can't do it anymore**. Last Monday, our senior program staff was in an all-day retreat, and **on the agenda was planning the changes we would need to make to no longer be a 24/7 staffed shelter**.

We have done our best to cobble together the additional funding for years. We have increased our fundraising; we have increased our grant writing; we have left staff vacancies unfilled; and we have cut back on services in other programs to keep the shelter staffed full-time. But there are no more rabbits to pull out of that hat. **Unless something changes as we approach our next fiscal year, we won't be able to sustain that level of service without doing irreparable harm to our other programs and services.**

This is the reality of domestic violence services that we are facing today. The only way to provide adequate safety and support for victims, and the complex lives they bring with them, is through 24-hour staffing at our shelters. I ask that you recommend to and advocate with Appropriations for the additional funding we need to continue to provide this essential service.

Thank you.