STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF VICTIM ADVOCATE
505 HUDSON STREET, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106

Testimony of Merit Lajoie, Office of the Victim Advocate
Submitted to the Judiciary Committee
Monday, March 10, 2008

Good Afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. For the record, my name is Merit Lajoie and I am the Complaint Officer for the Office of the Victim Advocate. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **SUPPORT** of:

Senate Bill No. 642, AAC the Availability of Victim Advocates in Courthouses

In 1996, Connecticut residents overwhelmingly supported the Victims' Rights Amendment to our state constitution. Since then, Connecticut has made significant strides to advance policy and improve the delivery of services to victims of crime, including the creation of the Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) in 1998. However, there has been little advancement to fully staff the courts around the state with victim services advocates. There are thirteen (13) Judicial District Courts (JD); twenty (20) Geographical Area Courts (GA); and thirteen (13) Juvenile Matters Courts (JM). Currently there is one (1) vacancy in the JD courts; there are four (4) vacancies in the GA courts; and ten (10) vacancies in the JM courts. Additionally, there are six (6) advocates providing services to victims in **both** a JD and a GA court.

I applaud the efforts of this committee and the entire General Assembly for some of the improvements made in the Criminal Justice Reform bill passed in special session. Section 14 of the bill requires the Office of Victim Services (OVS), Judicial Branch, to **assign** two (2) victim advocates to provide full-time assistance to victims who appear before the Board of Pardons and Paroles, effective from passage. It is more than likely that two *existing* advocates will be reassigned to fulfill this mandate. Although this proposal may seem as a costly endeavor, in reality, once an advocate has been assigned in every court, the court process, I believe, will actually run more cost effective and efficient for judges, prosecutors and crime victims.

The Judicial Branch is responsible for funding and maintaining many areas of the criminal justice system, i.e. court staff; court support services; offender programs; judicial marshals; interpreter services; juvenile services; etc. The result is an overwhelming competition for funds to hire staff and implement programs in all of the Judicial Branch areas, including victim services advocates. Unless and until money is specifically earmarked for victim services advocates, the money will continue to be redirected and appropriated to other areas of need. It has been almost twelve years since the passage of the Victims' Rights Amendment; had money been allocated and earmarked specifically for victim services advocates each year for the last twelve years, nearly every court in the state would have an advocate to assist victims through the criminal justice process. Monies are allocated and specifically earmarked for many

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areas; court support services; reentry and diversionary programs; and community support services. Now is the time to do the same for victims of crime.

Senate Bill No. 642 will require the Judicial Department to assign at least one victim advocate in each of the JD and GA courts around the state. Crime victims, more often than not, have little or no experience or knowledge of the criminal justice process. They are thrust into a system that is confusing and frustrating during a very vulnerable and traumatic time in their life. Without a victim services advocate to help navigate the criminal justice system, crime victims needlessly experience additional frustration, confusion and victimization.

I would respectfully request that the committee amend the language to include the same requirement for a victim services advocate in each of the JM courts. The affects of and trauma experienced by a crime victim are no different because of the age of the offender. Further, all crime victims have constitutional rights throughout the criminal justice process, regardless of the offender's age. This legislature has specifically addressed the issue of victim participation in juvenile delinquency proceedings and has amended the juvenile statutes to ensure that victims play a role in those proceedings.

The OVA has heard from many victims, prosecutors, judges and others that advocates are a necessity in every court. Prosecutors and judges rely heavily on advocates to maintain communication with victims and provide information regarding restitution, plea bargains and sentencing. Victim services advocates also are able to meet and talk with crime victims more frequently than prosecutors. Crime victims that walk into a courthouse for the first time, without any previous experience, are intimidated, overwhelmed and scared. The victim services advocate is the compass in the criminal justice process that can guide a victim through the dark halls of justice.

I strongly urge the committee to support Senate Bill No. 642, with an amendment to include a victim services advocate in all Juvenile Matter courts. Thank you again for your consideration of my testimony.

Merit Lajoie

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