

February 23, 2009

Good evening everyone and thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

My name is Jennifer Lopez. I am the Advocacy Program Director at Interval House. Interval House, a non-profit domestic violence program here in Hartford, provides comprehensive services to victims of domestic violence and their children in the Hartford community and 23 other towns surrounding Hartford.

I am here today to ask you to please assist Legal Aide to continue the wonderful work their doing, by finding and allocating funding necessary to continue providing quality legal representation to our community.

When I first heard that Legal Aide's funding had been cut, I was surprised, and then I became concerned. I was concerned because Greater Hartford Legal Aide has been a great legal resource for thousands of victims of domestic violence in our community, most of which are women and children. They make themselves available for legal consultations; they represent our clients on many different legal issues, i.e. divorce, custody, child support, benefits, housing, immigration and more. They are and have also been a valuable resource to the domestic violence programs by answering our many questions as we support and advocate for victims while they navigate the different systems alone.

Working for a non-profit organization, I understand what negative consequences budget cuts can have. It usually means cutting down your budget by laying off staff. They then do not have the means to be able to take as many clients which in turn starts a domino effect that negatively impacts the community.

For the past 20 years that I have been at Interval House, I have advocated for many victims who have reached out to different systems which they hope can help them build a new life free of violence, and to regain their sense of safety and free will, which is so essential to all human beings to grow and progress in life.

The Judicial system is one of these systems that many victims of domestic violence rely on to get this accomplished i.e. to attain restraining orders as part of their safety plan, to cut off as many ties as possible with the abusive partner by getting a divorce, to get custody or put steps in place to protect their children, to prevent eviction and more. However, when they become involved in the judicial process they soon realize how difficult, intimidating and challenging it is. Where do I go? Who do I talk to? What do I say? Will they believe me? Can I get an attorney appointed to me? These are some of the questions victims ask themselves before and when they become involved in the judicial process. When they have no one to turn to for answers, these questions turn to doubt which leads to fear of the unknown, causing some women to stay in their relationship.

Can victims of domestic violence represent themselves? No victim of any crime should have to go thru this process alone or worse face her attacker alone. Legal Aide has been providing quality legal services in our community for many years. The community has come to rely on them; therefore it is crucial that Legal Aid has the resources needed to continue their work.

I don't think there is a need to convince anyone in this room that legal representation can be very costly. Imagine women with children who leave an abusive relationship with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Please give these vital organizations the funding necessary to get the job done. Thank you.