

Monday, March 16, 2009
Testimony on Senate Bill No. 839
Room 2-B of the Legislative Office Building

Honorable members of the Committee on Government Administration and Elections:

My name is Marlene Berg and I am Associate Director of the Institute for Community Research in Hartford Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to present my views on the importance of the CT Office of Child Advocate and why it should remain an independent and fully-staffed agency.

As you have heard, and will I am sure will continue to hear, throughout this session, OCA serves a vital in relation to Connecticut's children Using its investigative powers OCA, since its creation in 1995, has identified critical areas of need that required attention in state-funded and state-operated programs-- thereby protecting the rights of children and giving voice to those young people whose suffering is often unheard and unseen.

I would like to speak to another role that OCA has played in fulfilling its mission of protecting children. In the spring of 2006, the Office of the Child Advocate took a leadership role in identifying and calling attention to a silent crisis that was growing in our state and in the nation—teen dating violence. Today given the involvement of celebrities, Chris Brown and Rihanna this issue is all over the media...yet it has been a growing, through often unrecognized epidemic, among our teens for several years.

In the Spring of 2006 the Office of the Child Advocate sponsored the Governor's summit on Teen Dating Violence here at the State Capital. Based on that initial initiative there has been a growing awareness of dating violence and a number of activities have developed to increase discussions and interventions designed to alert youth to the warning signs of dating violence, provide education and advocacy related to building and sustaining health relationships, and examining the pathways to teen dating violence and understanding its linkage to domestic violence in adult relationships.

OCA has continued to maintain its leadership role in these educational and advocacy efforts. Activities, involving increasing large numbers of teens throughout urban, suburban and rural communities in Connecticut, which often go unnoticed by the media, but which are crucial to positive youth development have

been growing. In the long run these activities, if successful, will save our state millions of dollars in treatment as well as untold suffering by youth who, without adequate education and knowledge might find themselves in difficult and often serious and life threatening relationship violence.

The type of leadership and awareness demonstrated by OCA in raising this issue and rallying resources to address it, is just one example of the foresight and sensitivity needed to protect our children. OCA with its well-trained and diverse professional staff serves not only an important investigative function, but due to its intense interaction with children in difficult circumstances in our state is able to serve as an early warning system... alerting us to some of the underlying issues in young people's lives which if handled proactively with prevention, will reduce the need for costly intervention in the future.

There is no other voice, which has been so consistent, in bringing to light the needs and suffering of Connecticut's most vulnerable population. This has been possible, because the agency, which is comprised of well-trained professionals, has been able to operate independently and has had staffing and funding in accordance with its weighty mission.

I urge this committee to retain an independent, adequately staffed Office of the Child Advocate to continue to ensure the protection of the children of Connecticut.

Thank you.