

To: Judiciary Committee
From: Enelsa Diaz, Staff Attorney
Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.
Date: March 26, 2009
Re: SB1157: An Act Concerning Funding for Legal Services and Judicial Branch
Technology

Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Enelsa Diaz. I am a staff attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid where I represent victims of domestic violence in both family and immigration cases. I am testifying in support of increased funding to legal services.

The work that we do at Legal Aid is so important because we not only assist individuals in asserting and protecting their fundamental legal rights, but we also advocate for the basic human needs of those living in poverty.

To give you an example of how our work impacts the lives of those living in poverty, I will tell you a little bit about my client Maria. Maria was an immigrant who was being violently abused by her American husband. He treated her like a slave, wouldn't let her work or leave the house, and he would viciously beat her and her son. When Maria attempted to stand up to her husband in their divorce, he hired an attorney to fight Maria for custody of their young daughter. Vulnerable, humiliated, and terrified, Maria might have lost custody if I had not been there to represent her. I was able to safety plan with Maria in her own language, understand her needs, and assert her rights in court. Only with the help of a lawyer experienced in representing domestic violence victims could Maria stand up to the abuse and win court orders that protected her and her children. Free from the violence and control of her ex-husband, Maria now works and supports her family. Her children can now play, go to school and grow up without fear.

At Legal Aid, what we do is so much more than filing a complaint, or attending a hearing. We give those who would not otherwise be heard, a voice -- often for the first time in their lives. We protect victims of family violence, secure the rights of low-income children to a quality education, and we keep people in their jobs and in their homes.

Please increase funding to legal services so that we can continue to protect victims of family violence -- victims like Maria and her children. Thank you.