



Women's Center of Greater Danbury, Inc.

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Written Testimony of the Women's Center of Greater Danbury, Inc.

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**HB 5622 An Act Concerning Expansion of Shelter Services for
Victims of Household Abuse**

February 18, 2009

To Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian and members of the Appropriations Committee:

As the domestic violence agency providing services to victims throughout the eleven town area of upper Fairfield and lower Litchfield counties, and a CCADV member agency, we are submitting this testimony in support of 24/7 on-site staff coverage of domestic violence shelters.

During the past fiscal year, the Women's Center helped 2,395 victims of domestic violence, including 77 women and children sheltered at Elizabeth House, our domestic violence shelter.

When a victim has made the decision to break the cycle of violence by leaving their abusive relationship, they are dependent on sheltering to make that possible. It is critical that we sustain the victim's commitment by reducing fear and anxiety and providing a safe and supportive environment. Major factors contributing to a new resident's trauma and stress include the immediate need to tackle transitioning to independent living and adjusting to communal living. Further, how a trauma survivor may process information can create significant complications. Our residents come to us in survival mode. It is not uncommon for victims to misperceive the level of danger of an event, for instance reacting to lost keys as if it were as threatening as an abuser's violence. In this post-traumatic mindset, healthy decision-making can be compromised and reactions can be disproportionate or inappropriate. Imagine, for a moment, if the immediate stressor is not soured milk or a snow delay disrupting the

day's schedule, but one of these representative situations or incidents that occurred at our shelter when no staff were on-site:

- being nine months pregnant and caring for four children under the age of seven
- having a child run in from the neighboring playground crying and screaming that he broke his finger in the gate and you have no car
- fearing that your gang member abuser will find this shelter just as he found the others
- you and your small children being awakened to the deafening sound of the alarm system, not knowing yet that it was triggered by wind rattling a loose window screen

Whether it is these very real crises or daily stressors, the presence of 24/7 on-site staff to calm the resident(s) and guide them through grounded options allows the safety and time our residents need to work on achieving safe and independent living arrangements.

During a brief period in FY 06-07, we were able to increase our shelter staff coverage to nearly 100% because of funds accumulated from a loss of staff in the months immediately preceding that time.

During that time, advocacy services to each resident increased from one hour per day to six and counseling services doubled to two hours per day. As a direct result, a record four out of ten residents achieved safe, independent living *within three months*. Our sister programs report similar increases, averaging three times more provision of services than programs without 24/7 staffing.

These successes attest to the effectiveness of consistent, uninterrupted 24/7 support of domestic violence victims while these complicating factors argue for its need.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.