



Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.

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Testimony of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.

HB 6532 An Act Concerning the Statute of Limitations for Bringing an Action for Damages for the Sexual Assault of a Minor
SB 646 An Act Excluding Sexual Assault and Other Violent Crime Victims from Jury Service in Certain Criminal Cases
HB 6702 An Act Concerning Public Access to Proceedings in Certain Juvenile Matters
HB 6703 An Act Concerning Victim Compensation
Elizabeth Cafarella, Director of Public Policy and Communication
Submitted to the Judiciary Committee
Public Hearing, March 26, 2009

Good afternoon Senator MacDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Committee, my name is Elizabeth Cafarella, and I am the Director of Public Policy and Communication at Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc. (CONNSACS).

CONNSACS is the statewide association of nine community-based rape crisis centers in Connecticut. Our mission is to end sexual violence and ensure high quality, comprehensive and culturally competent sexual assault victim services.

I would like to offer testimony in support of **HB 6532 An Act Concerning the Statute of Limitations for Bringing an Action for Damages for the Sexual Assault of a Minor.**

Child sexual abuse and exploitation is a serious crime with devastating consequences for victims. Psychological trauma from child sexual abuse can delay reporting, allowing the perpetrators to escape prosecution because of the very nature of the harm caused. Sexual abuse victims need more time to report their sexual abuse because of the extraordinary stress under which child sex abuse victims live their lives. Children and teens who have been sexually victimized do not come forward because of fear, shame, misplaced guilt, and psychological abuse. They often face enormous pressures to remain silent because of threats, fear, and family dynamics. Offenders, who more often than not know their victim, and sometimes even the victim's family, will threaten, coerce, or bribe a victim to keep quiet about the abuse to protect the family and abuser. This is particularly true when the perpetrator is a highly regarded professional or community leader.

The discovery of new evidence may serve as a trigger for victims and cause them to re-live their assault. In a highly publicized recent case, material evidence was discovered many years after the abuse took place. In our experience working with victims, the emergence of new evidence may be traumatizing, but it also provides validation and provides the opportunity for the victim to come forward, now that they know they will be believed. We need to ensure that when new evidence comes to light, victims have a remedy to hold offenders accountable.

We encourage lawmakers to continue to look for solutions to provide justice to Connecticut's children who were sexually abused and urge committee members to support this bill.

With respect to **SB 646 An Act Excluding Sexual Assault and Other Violent Crime Victims from Jury Service in Certain Criminal Cases**, CONNSACS supports this bill with certain reservations.

We support the idea of victims of sexual assault being exempt from jury service, as the entire process of a criminal trial could be a powerful trigger, causing further trauma to the victim. We appreciate the effort to protect victims from this kind of re-victimization. Concerns have been expressed, however, with the verification process outlined by the bill, and how exactly the verification would be accomplished. Many victims do not report their assault to the police, so there would be no police report to verify that the crime occurred. It is imperative that the verification process does not cause further psychological trauma to the victim, and that the victim's confidentiality is protected.

We believe that the pilot proposed in **HB 6702, An Act Concerning Public Access to Proceedings in Certain Juvenile Matters**, could have a negative impact on child and youth victims of sexual abuse. We should not place child sexual abuse victims in any situation where there is potential for further trauma.

While the bill proposes that judges will have the ultimate discretion to exclude a member of the public from the courtroom on a case by case basis, this does not address the presence of members of the public in the waiting areas of juvenile courts. Though we understand that this pilot will take place in Hartford, New Haven, and a third, to be chosen jurisdiction, many of our juvenile courts serve small, rural towns where "everyone knows everybody." We are concerned that a victim or non-offending parent might find themselves sitting next to a neighbor or a member of their church. The mere presence of these community members in the time preceding the hearing may not only compromise the confidentiality of the victim, but also further intimidate the victim and add to his or her fear and anxiety of others knowing what has happened.

Further, child sexual abuse is already an underreported crime, especially as a majority of child victims know the person who assaulted them. By opening up juvenile proceedings, we are creating yet another barrier for child victims to come forward. If these extremely personal matters are open to the public and the media we have the potential of not only creating public stigmatization for the offender, but also for the victim.

Finally, the presence of the public and especially the media may serve as a deterrent for parents in abuse proceedings from admitting the abuse and asking for help in seeking treatment.

We understand that the proponents of this bill want to open juvenile proceedings in order to highlight the shortcomings in the system's response to child abuse and neglect. While we certainly applaud any reforms that would protect children from abuse, we believe that this bill endangers a child sexual abuse victim's right to privacy and has the potential to re-victimize the child and cause even more harm.

We encourage committee members to oppose this bill.

CONNSACS supports **HB 6703 An Act Concerning Victim Compensation**. This bill would address circumstances in which residents of Connecticut are sexually assaulted while traveling outside the country and the country in which the attack occurred does not have a victim compensation program. Under current law, these victims of sexual violence are not eligible for victim compensation for an attack that occurred outside of the United States. Historically, the demand for victim compensation has exceeded allocations. This bill would also allow greater flexibility to the Office of Victim Services in awarding compensation to victims.

