

March 1, 2010

**Testimony in Favor of H.B. 5315, "AN ACT CONCERNING
EDUCATION AND THE REDUCTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE"**

Thank you for your consideration of this important piece of legislation. I am writing in support of House Bill 5315, adding teen dating violence and domestic violence education to the list of required subject matter to be provided to teachers, administrators and pupil personnel by boards of education.

The Women's Center of Southeastern Connecticut, Inc. *provides domestic violence services to approximately 6,000 victims per year in New London County.*

Since 1993, we have been providing school-based, violence prevention education to students in grades K-12. Last year, we provided 324 sessions in 11 different school districts to approximately 3,500 students. Those totals included high school and middle school students receiving education in forming healthy relationships and dating violence, and included additional sessions on sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender images in the media.

We know that experiences and behaviors exhibited in youth affect a lifetime of relationships and behaviors in adulthood. **Victims of dating violence struggle in school; they are often victims or perpetrators of domestic violence as adults; they experience greater instances of mental illness and substance abuse; and more often than we dare to contemplate, the abuse results in murder or suicide.**

With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting 16.3%, the second highest percentage in the nation, of Connecticut high school students reporting having been hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend, we can't continue, year-after-year, to graduate students who believe that this behavior is normal.

Last year, we conducted our own study in Southeastern Connecticut. We surveyed 1,242 8th through 12th graders, and learned that 12% of students had been hit, slapped or physically hurt by their boyfriend or girlfriend. That is a full 1/3 above the national average! I have attached a copy of a summary of our survey results for your reference.

The students also told us loudly and clearly that they believed that additional teen dating violence education is needed, and that teachers and counselors need additional teen dating violence prevention education.

Teachers, administrators, pupil personnel and domestic violence service providers can form a powerful partnership to address this issue. Our experience has been, and we continue to believe, that the best way to provide dating violence education is in conjunction with domestic violence victim service providers.

School staff need to understand the dynamics of domestic violence and how it may be affecting the lives of their students and their ability to learn. Students may be experiencing it at home. They may be experiencing it in their relationships at school. They may be experiencing it in their dating relationships.

We are immersed in this issue, day-in and day-out. We know that it is much more than just date rape. It is all forms of controlling, demeaning, humiliating, and injurious behavior. We know, first-hand, how abusive relationships affect lives and can bring that experience into the classroom.

We build our programs on evidence-based curricula, but we learn from our students, and enhance the programs with the realities of their world years before it appears in standardized teaching materials.

If we ever want to decrease the incidents of domestic violence in Connecticut, reduce the need for mental health and substance abuse services, increase the success of our students in school, and reduce the costs associated with those services, we need to invest in programs that prevent dating violence and promote healthy relationships among our youth. And the best way to provide those programs is through the schools in partnership with local domestic violence victim service providers.

We ask that you support this important first step by requiring that teachers, administrators and pupil personnel receive this important training.

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