

To: The State of Connecticut Judiciary Committee

From: Tracy L. Tamborra, PhD

Date: 3-19-10

Re: The Office of the Victim Advocate *HB 5485*

State of Connecticut Victims' Services providers are fortunate to have the Office of the Victim Advocate. The foresight demonstrated by the State to develop and implant the work of the OVA is progressive. As a former director of Domestic Violence at a not-for-profit agency in New Jersey, and a member of the State of New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women, I can attest to the need for an independent watchdog agency. As a director and coalition member I was aware of concerns and problems that victims seeking services encountered while interacting with some law enforcement and victim services agencies, as well as the State coalitions. While most persons who work directly or indirectly with victims of crime are well-intentioned; human error, personal bias, and political pressures can negatively impact the victims we purport to represent. As such an independent, politically unaffiliated entity, tasked with monitoring all levels of victims' services, is an incredible resource. I believe that the State of Connecticut has this resource in the OVA.

I am aware that Raised Bill No. 5485 proposes to allow the advisory committee to the OVA to evaluate the OVA and make recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of the office. While this seems like a laudable goal, I question the potential for a conflict of interest. As I understand it, the current advisory board is comprised of persons who represent agencies that could be investigated by the OVA. Increasing the oversight power of such an advisory board seems problematic. What is to prevent an agency, (with a representative on the advisory committee) under investigation by the OVA, from using their oversight authority to retaliate against the OVA? Furthermore, even in cases where an investigation by OVA is not an issue, it seems that the best interest of victims is being overlooked. We should encourage oversight; we should encourage constructive criticism; we should foster the development of best practices. The OVA needs to be able to operate without fear of reprisal from a potentially disgruntled advisory board.

In addition, as a Criminologist who specializes in victimization issues, I can attest to the increased corporatization and politicalization of victims' services. Boardroom rules and political maneuvering should not apply in the world of victim advocacy. Victim advocacy is not always popular. Sometimes a good advocate needs to do what is politically or economically unpopular, but morally and ethically just, for a victim. As such the OVA advisory board should mainly consist of survivors and other community members, who are not directly impacted by the decisions and investigations of the OVA.

In closing, I wish to share with you my first-hand knowledge of the OVA's commitment to victims of crime. I come in contact with students who have been sexually assaulted. Last year I contacted the OVA after a student, who was sexually assaulted, felt that the police department and prosecutor's office involved in her case were dismissive and biased. The OVA took the student's complaint seriously and immediately began an inquiry. A staff member came to campus and heard the victim's account. I was impressed by the compassion showed to the student, the professionalism and expertise demonstrated, and their commitment to best practices. The student commented to me that although she was disillusioned by the formal criminal justice system, she felt like her story was taken seriously by the OVA. The OVA validated this victim's experience when the criminal justice system could not. Please continue to allow the OVA to grow in its capacity to support victims of crime.