



Women's Center  
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# 5246

**Testimony in Favor of An Act Concerning Distribution of the Marriage License Surcharge and Changes to the Landlord and Tenant Statutes to Benefit Victims of Domestic Violence**

Good morning/afternoon. I am Cathy Zeiner, Executive Director of the Women's Center of Southeastern Connecticut, Inc. We provide domestic violence services to approximately 6,000 victims per year in New London County.

For years, we were one of the last three (3) domestic violence shelters in Connecticut with 24-hour paid staff. Then, on October 1<sup>st</sup> of 2008, unable to patch together the funding necessary to sustain that level of service, we had to cut back, and staffed our shelter only until 5:00 pm on weekdays.

In the very first week after that change, one of residents was mugged on her way back to the shelter from work, because no one was at the shelter to pay for a cab to get her home safely, or to keep an eye out for her, and raise concern when she didn't arrive on time.

During that time and just by chance, when an on-call staff member happened to be at the shelter to receive a new resident late at night, **the staff member overheard a resident, in a moment of abject despair, telling someone that she had a knife and wanted to kill herself and her children.** If we had not been there, to help talk her through that moment, and get her the emotional help she needed, I don't even want to imagine what might have happened.

Our clients are too fragile and the stakes are too high to leave these situations to chance. **We need staff on site at our shelters 24-hours/day; 7-days/week.**

Fortunately for us, as of October 1<sup>st</sup> of last year, we were awarded stimulus funds to return our staff to 24/7. But, that will last for only 2 years, and after that, we may be forced to put our clients at risk again.



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Member Agency  
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**One important way that the state can move us closer to the goal of 24/7 staffing, is by ensuring that money collected through the marriage license surcharge (MLS) is released to the domestic violence programs promptly, completely, and with limited strings attached.**

If an additional \$30,000 or \$40,000 had been available to us for staffing, we could have provided coverage until clients went to bed, and/or we could have provided some support on weekends. We could have prevented more women from losing their children and sinking back into substance abuse. We could have prevented more women from using the emergency room to respond to minor health situations after hours. We could have prevented more women and children from returning to their abuser, when no one was there to contradict their fears and insecurities.

As you know only about ½ of the cost of providing adequately staffed shelter services is funded through our state contracts. We have to patch together the rest of the funding from a variety of different funding sources, each with its own restrictions and requirements. Many of those sources will not provide continued funding for the same programs year after year. **As a result, it is critically important that we have flexibility in how we use the MLS funds, so that we can fill any gaps in funding created by this patchwork of other restricted funding sources, and so that we can ensure that all of the necessary components of our shelter programs are available every year/all year to the victims who need us.**

Each domestic violence provider has access to different resources. Some have access to free computers from major corporations located in their city, while others do not. Some have access to contractors who will donate a new kitchen, while others do not. Some have access to large amounts of fundraising dollars, while others do not.

When DSS holds back the money collected for domestic violence services, and prescribes in a very limited way how those funds will be used, they wind up shortchanging essential services for some programs, and paying for less essential acquisitions in others. That is a very inefficient way to allocate limited resources.

Each program should be granted the discretion to use the money in support of shelter services, as their unique circumstances dictate – whether that be to repair a roof, replace a bathroom, update technology, or enhance staffing services. These resources need to be offered on a timely basis, not years after they were collected; and they need to be paid out promptly, not 6 months after a spending plan has been approved – by then, contractors won't hold their prices.

**This is a solution that won't cost the state additional money, and will ensure that domestic violence victims receive the best emergency resources and services available in these frightening times.**

I respectfully request that you support Bill 5246.

Thank you.