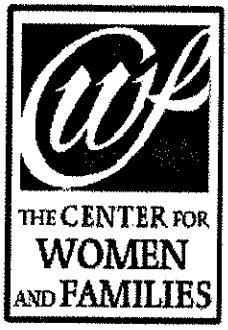

Testimony of Susan Schnitzer

H.B. 6380: AAC the Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2013

March 4, 2011

Good evening Senator Prague, Representative Hamm, Representative Villano and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Susan Schnitzer. I am the Director of Contracts and Program Administration for The Center for Women and Families of Eastern Fairfield County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on House Bill 6380: An Act Concerning the Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2013.

The Center's mission is dedicated to strengthening women and families by eliminating violence and abuse through education, intervention, advocacy, and community collaboration. For the last four decades of our 116 year history of personal empowerment and family services for the community, we have dedicated our mission to end domestic and sexual violence. We teach prevention education, train professionals, and raise consciousness on community, organizational, and legislative levels to create social change to end violence. Annually, The Center provides over 5,000 victims with crisis, restorative, advocacy, and specialized services; and we teach train, and provide outreach services to approximately 7,500 children and adults. We are active and proud members of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, and the Bridgeport Continuum of Care. We work collaboratively with several state agencies, including the Department of Social Services, the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Correction.

The interrelated nature of domestic violence and homelessness is undeniable: 92% of homeless women have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives, and 63% have been victims of intimate partner violence as adults. This is not because homeless women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, rather experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault often forces women and children into homelessness. In 2006, a report by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that 44 percent of the cities surveyed identified domestic violence as the primary cause of homelessness.

The overarching objectives of our Domestic Violence Safe Home are:

- To provide survivors of domestic violence and their children with safe and supportive emergency shelter;
- To increase the knowledge of survivors around the dynamics of domestic violence and how to ensure their own safety and the safety of their children;
- To prepare survivors for life after the Safe Home by incorporating life skills training, advocacy support to access needed public services, and assistance with a more permanent housing placement.

As part of the state and nation wide networks of domestic violence safe homes, Kathie's Place, The Center's safe home, provides survivors with the vital supportive services to facilitate a safer and more successful transition into an independent living situation. The safe home staff works with survivors to develop safety plans for themselves and their families, to provide education on the effects of domestic violence and to provide life skills training for the care of survivors and their families. Safe home residents have access to the other domestic violence related services offered by The Center, including: family and individual advocacy, support groups, legal counseling, clinical services for children, court advocacy, referrals for

employment/job development and assistance securing and maintaining independent housing.

For the last year and a half, The Center has provided 24 hour onsite staffing at Kathie's Place, a goal that we have been working towards as an agency and coalition member for many years. With all safe homes in the state now staffed 24 hours a day, survivors and their children are receiving the safety and support needed to begin their healing process and to move forward on their path from surviving to thriving.

Multiple locations throughout Connecticut allow for survivors to leave their home area when it is not safe to remain close by, and to remain when it is safe. Crisis service advocates work with survivors to determine what best meets their needs. Sometimes, they choose to stay close to their home base because they have employment or educational obligations but do not have transportation to travel. Others may need to leave the area, state or even the country to remain safe. Crisis services advocates work with survivors and community providers to ensure that the survivors move increases their safety.

24-hour staffing at the Safe House is imperative because it provides an increased actual and perceived sense of safety for the clients. If there is an emergency or crisis staff is onsite to assist and/or counsel anytime. Many times, survivors will be up until the early morning hours as they work through the trauma of abuse and of uprooting from their home. Overnight staff are available to provide counseling in these hours, which are often the most daunting. For survivors with children and/or who are working, this is the only time they can talk without interruption. In addition to counseling, Crisis Services Advocates can help the shelter residents organize their time for the days and weeks ahead, teach coping skills and techniques.

When all residents are asleep, the overnight staff can take care of case management tasks such as writing emails, letters and referrals for additional services, researching resources online,

and organizing/cleaning up the safe home to maintain a healthy, safe and suitable living environment for the residents. The day staff is involved with most of the transportation, assisting with meals and homework, and ongoing counseling and coordination during the day.

Without a domestic violence safe home to turn to, many survivors would have to choose between remaining in their violent situations and becoming homeless. Once a survivor and their family is safe within the walls of Kathie's Place, they can begin their work to break the cycle of violence in their lives, and in the lives of their children.

A Survivor's Story: Annie

Annie came into shelter with her young son. Annie was working two jobs and also was attending school. She would leave early in the morning and would not return to the house until late in the evening. Since Annie did not have a chance to interact with daytime or evening staff, she client met with the staff on the overnight shifts to receive counseling, information, and referrals. Annie was with us for 30 days and then transitioned into a new living environment for her and her son. Without the overnight staff, Annie and her son would not have had access to the counseling, educational services and case management assistance that lead to her successful transition to a new and safe living environment. Funding from DSS allows us to provide a more comprehensive scope of services on-site regardless of the time of day.

Survivors utilize the overnight staff for counseling, information and referrals, life skills, and safety planning. Survivors have stated numerous times that they feel safer knowing there is staff on-site all the time. This staff also has the ability to gather resources and maintain a suitable living environment for clients that frees up daytime staff so they can focus on case management and advocacy with community agencies.

One of the greatest barriers for survivors when leaving a domestic violence safe home is obtaining safe and affordable longer term housing. As long-term housing options become scarcer, victims are staying longer in emergency domestic violence safe homes. Once a survivor and their family is safe within the walls of Kathie's Place they can begin their work to break the cycle of violence in their lives, and in the lives of their children.

Thank you.