



Women's Center
of Southeastern
Connecticut Inc.

Testimony of Cathy Zeiner

House Bill 6380: An Act Concerning the Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2013.

Good evening Senator Prague, Representative Hamm, Representative Villano and members of the Appropriations Committee. Good evening. My name is Cathy Zeiner, and I am here to ask that you approve the Governor's proposal to maintain funding for domestic violence shelters. I am the Executive Director of the Women's Center of Southeastern Connecticut, Inc. where we save lives, restore hope and change the future for approximately 6,000 victims of domestic violence and sexual assault every year in New London County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on House Bill 6380: An Act Concerning the Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2013.

In 2008, we were in the unique position of being one of the last three (3) domestic violence shelters in the state with 24-hour paid staff. Due to dramatic funding cuts that year, and cumulatively over time, we had to reduce our staffing to just weekdays and a few evenings per week. Let me tell you what happened to Melanie (not her real name) during that time, just one of many preventable incidents.

We received a call at 6:00 am Friday morning from the police. 911 Dispatch got a call from a frantic mother who was concerned about her daughter. Melanie had

called home to say she was going to kill herself. No one knew where she was, but she did say that she had recently left her abusive boyfriend, and they thought she might be at a domestic violence shelter.

The police went to the shelter and knocked on the door, but no one answered. There was no staff there, so the residents cowered in their rooms, fearing who might be at the door. The police called us and our supervisor met them at the shelter. She knocked on the door to Melanie's room. No one answered. She entered the room. Melanie was gone and bottles of pills were opened and scattered on the floor. So, the police initiated a multi-town search. After several hours, they found Melanie, who had checked herself into the hospital under a variation of her name.

If we had been there, we could have helped Melanie through that fragile period; we could have referred her to mental health services much less expensive than the emergency room; and we could have prevented the use of several hours of law enforcement time, in more than one town, searching for her.

Staffing shelters saves time and saves money. In the 12 months after we returned to 24-hour staffing of our shelter:

- **We served 30% more people**, because we were there to receive women and families at night, on weeks and on holidays
- **We increased our bed nights by 37%** because clients were less fearful of being found, or insecure that they couldn't make it on their own; so they did not return to their abusers.

Demand for our domestic violence shelter has never been greater. In October, 2010 alone:

- **We were at 112% capacity, with women sleeping on couches or trundle beds, and children in portable cribs**
- **We paid for a mom and her 5 boys to live in a motel because there was no room anywhere in the state, and moving them out of state would mean that she would have had to quit her new job: the essential first step in setting up a new home for her family.**
- **We paid to shelter a man in another motel because he could not be safe in any of the homeless shelters in our region.**

We now spend twice what we did just 2 years ago on transportation of victims to shelters both in and outside of Connecticut, because we are full, and it is not unusual to find days when we can't find a safe house bed anywhere in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, or New York.

The need is extreme. The risk is high. And we are willing to answer the call. But, we need your continued help to do it.

As you deliberate funding to preserve Connecticut's safety net – as well as our public safety system – please make continued funding of our domestic violence shelter services a top priority.

Thank you.

