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**Testimony of Michelle Cruz, Esq., State Victim Advocate
Submitted to the Education Committee
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Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and distinguished members of the Education Committee. For the record, my name is Michelle Cruz and I am the Victim Advocate for the State of Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony concerning:

Raised Senate Bill No. 1138, *An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws*

The physical and emotional well being of our school children must be paramount for a successful educational experience by our children. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, each day 160,000 children stay home from school to avoid bullying behavior. Clearly, as a nation, we are not doing enough to address this issue. In 2010, there were at least fourteen suicide deaths of school children directly linked to bullying. Although Connecticut has attempted to address the problem of bullying behavior in our schools, Raised Senate Bill No. 1138 will significantly improve the deficiencies and provide more consistency in the response to bullying throughout the schools in our state.

Before any of us new better, bullying was commonly referred to as “a right of passage” or “just boys being boys”. We now know the long lasting and devastating effects that bullying behavior can have on victims, bystanders and even bullies. Victims of bullying struggle with issues of self-esteem, isolation and fear. Bystanders, or individuals that witness bullying, are affected as they feel helpless and fear they may become the bully’s next target. A recent study conducted by the Family and Work Institute reported that one-third of children are bullied at least once a month, while six out of ten teens witnessed bullying at least once a day.

Additionally, and just as troubling, is that when bullying behavior is not addressed as children, bullies themselves learn that threats and aggression are acceptable behaviors and often carry those behaviors into adulthood. One study conducted by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, nearly sixty percent of boys, who researchers identified as bullies in grades six to nine, were convicted of at least one crime by the age of twenty-four, while forty percent had three or more convictions. Think about the number of lives that could have been very different, victims and bullies, had the behaviors been addressed as children.

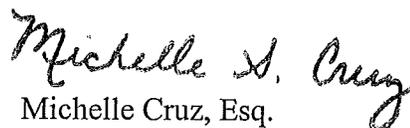
Unfortunately the children who are most susceptible to self harm as a result of bullying are those who feel they don't have a voice for a myriad of reasons, including the results of sexual abuse, dysfunctional home environment and so on. These same children are more likely to become the victims of bullies and also, simultaneously, may arguably be more severely affected by bullying. It's this population who will remain silent despite the "procedures in place" and the "resources" available for they already feel their voice is muted and are distrustful of the system. If we are really to change the pattern of bullying then we need to look for ways to encourage these children to come forward by creating access to help through processes that allow them to feel safe.

I commend the Committee for putting forth a comprehensive proposal that addresses the many facets of bullying, including the improved definition, procedures for responding to bullying behavior, training and education for school employees, opportunities for parents and the public to provide input and a statewide day of awareness for the observance of bullying. I would like to make two recommendations for the Committee's consideration. The first, a requirement that the Department of Education establish a statewide toll free bullying hotline that would be available to children who, for whatever reason, do not feel safe reporting bullying behavior to their respective school officials. Unfortunately we have seen the devastating affects that result when bullied children feel they have no options. A simple hotline, available 24/7, may be the last effort taken by a bullied child, which ultimately could save the life of that child.

Finally, the second recommendation is for the requirement of each school in the state to provide a "STOP THE BULLY BOX" that would be easily accessible, confidential and secure. The box would be nothing more than the equivalent of a suggestion box; a tool available to all school children, not just those that may be bullied, to report bullying or comment on the response to bullying. Although the concept may sound archaic given all of the technological capabilities of today, this box would serve as a resource for a child that is just not comfortable verbally communicating concerns or fears.

Again, I would like to commend the Committee and urge a favorable report on Raised Senate Bill No. 1138. Thank you for consideration of my testimony.

Respectfully submitted,



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