

# Center for Youth Leadership Stamford Youth Services Bureau

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## Judiciary Committee

### Testimony, March 30, 2011

#### *HB 6629: An Act Concerning Domestic Violence*

Good afternoon Senator Coleman and Representative Fox. We have special greetings for Representatives Morris and Tong, who represent us in Norwalk and Stamford, and Representative Flexer, who we know from her leadership of the Speaker's Task Force on Domestic Violence.

My name is Rebecca Porter and I am a member of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. With me is Melisa Cardona from the Stamford Youth Services Bureau and Stamford High School. On behalf of the 226 student activists at our schools, we urge you to support HB 6629, *An Act Concerning Domestic Violence*, especially those sections that address teens' access to restraining orders against their abusive teen dating partners.

We have been working on teen dating violence issues since 2004. We lead two public awareness activities a month in our schools and communities. We volunteer twice a week at two domestic violence shelters in Fairfield County. And we work with legislators and members of our boards of education on policy issues.

Teen dating violence is important to us because it is one of Connecticut's more stubborn public health issues, with demonstrated connections to bullying, school failure, birth control sabotage, drug use, suicide, and adult domestic violence. In fact, according to the Connecticut Department of Public Health, of those Connecticut students who reported verbal and physical dating violence last year, 30 percent considered suicide; 25 percent made a suicide plan; and 20 percent attempted suicide.

The recommendation we made to the Speaker's Task Force on Domestic Violence is consistent with our mission to increase access to information, services and justice for teens, and is based on research we conducted. We met with two judges who oversee juvenile matters at Stamford Superior Court. We talked to staff from national and local domestic violence prevention and advocacy organizations. We talked to the policy committees of our boards of education. We researched laws in other states, including Rhode Island and Massachusetts, both of which have laws on the books about teens and restraining orders.<sup>1</sup> And we talked to people

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<sup>1</sup> In Rhode Island and Massachusetts, minors can obtain Protective Orders (POs), courts can issue POs against minor abusers, and people in dating relationships may seek POs against their abusers. Please see R.I. GEN. LAWS §§ 15-15-1(2) (2009) and 8-8.1-1(3), as well as 1 MASS. GEN. LAWS ANN. Ch. 209A, § 8 (West 2009). 2 *Id.* § 3. 3 *Id.* § 1. Source: *Break the Cycle* at <http://www.breakthecycle.org/content/teen-dating-violence-state-law-report-cards>

our age who have been in physically and emotionally abusive dating relationships. We firmly believe that access to restraining orders should be included in a comprehensive safety plan for teens who are struggling to remove themselves from abusive dating relationships.

We want to highlight one area of concern regarding the legislation - the potential impact on schools. We know that the law entitles everyone to an education, including those students who have been accused of abusing a dating partner. That's why we are working with our school districts in Norwalk and Stamford on a teen dating violence policy and a protocol.

The protocol is key because it will allow school administrators to respond to teen dating violence incidents on campus in a *consistent* way and an *efficient* way. This is important in cases that require accommodations for the victim and/or his/her abuser; accommodations that can range from a change in class schedule to placement in an alternative educational setting.

We know school administrators are asked to do a lot to support our academic, physical and emotional health. They usually know how to respond to student behavior on campus that violates the school district's code of conduct, but teen dating violence cases present administrators with a unique set of circumstances, especially if things have escalated to the point where a restraining order has been secured against an abuser who attends the same school as his/her victim. That's why a consistent and a uniform response is key, which is where the protocol comes in.

We hope things never reach the point where someone my age has to secure a restraining order against his/her teen abuser. There are organizations in Stamford and Norwalk dedicated to preventing teen dating violence and reconciling relationships that have played themselves out.

However, in the event that the abuse *defines* the relationship and has become so violent that it compromises a teen's ability to function emotionally, socially and academically, then people our age should have access to a restraining order as part of a comprehensive safety plan. Therefore, we ask you to support HB 6629.

Thank you.

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