

**Written Testimony for the Record Submitted by
Brian Sullivan
Director of Policy
Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence**

**Submitted to the
Joint Committee on Judiciary**

**Hearing on
H.B. No. 5388 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING COURT FEES AND THE DELIVERY
OF LEGAL SERVICES TO THE POOR**

**Hearing Held March 9, 2012
Written Testimony Submitted March 8, 2012**

Co-Chairman Eric Coleman, Co-Chairman Gerald Fox and Members of the Committee,

I am pleased to have the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) to be included in the Committee's official record of the hearing held March 9, 2012, on "H.B. No. 5388: An Act Concerning Court Fees and the Delivery of Legal Services to the Poor."

CCADV is the leading voice of domestic violence victims across the state, and represents its 18 member organizations, which work to provide counseling, support services and safe accommodations for victims and their children. We work tirelessly to change social conditions through advocacy, public awareness, technical assistance and education.

I commend you, Co-Chairmen Coleman and Fox and the entire Committee for holding this important hearing, which provides a useful forum to examine the need for additional legal aid funding for victims of domestic violence in Connecticut.

CCADV has a long-standing working relationship with Connecticut's Legal Aid programs, as victims of domestic violence turn to legal services for help when they need restraining and/or custody orders (especially if their abuser has an attorney), when they need help keeping their housing or employment because the abuser's harassment is causing problems for them, and for a whole host of other legal issues that are especially problematic for the poor.

Last year alone, about 1500 victims of domestic violence across the state received Legal Aid services. If Legal Aid programs are forced to reduce services by the projected 25% figure because additional funding sources cannot be developed, just under 400 victims of domestic violence will no longer have access to legal services in our state.

The prospect of further service reductions and layoffs is unacceptable, especially given the fact that in our most recent CCADV survey, 85% of our domestic violence advocates agreed that having *more* Legal Aid attorneys was necessary. Additionally, the indigent population across Connecticut continues to rise, as the number of state residents needing food stamps has almost

doubled since 2007. As such, we can expect a similar increase in the number of people who will not be able to afford private legal representation, placing further strain on our already packed Legal Aid system.

Legal Aid employees and supporters have been doing everything in their power to maintain their level of service to poor people in Connecticut, despite the difficult economic climate of the last few years. Because of their ramped-up fundraising efforts, donations from the legal community have actually increased. Legal Aid has received foundation funding, maximized federal funding, and maintained their support from local United Ways. But even with these newly developed sources, and the vital state funding boost they received in 2009, Legal Aid programs have shrunk through layoff, attrition, and continued unpaid days.

As such, without the passage of HB5388, which will impose increases in court fees to raise an additional \$5.2 million in Legal Aid funding, poor people in Connecticut who have already been victimized by their abusers *will* lose access to the legal services they so desperately need, and be forced to suffer once more through no fault of their own.

This legislation is vital to ensuring that the less fortunate members of our community will continue to have access to Connecticut courts. The projected \$5.2 million infusion that will result from the passage of HB5388 will be a solid investment for the people of Connecticut, since Legal Aid services help people get out of domestic violence shelters, avoid homeless shelters, help disabled people access federal benefits, and help senior citizens maintain their independence. Legal aid programs reduce the number of unrepresented people flooding the courts, and leverage donated legal help for the poor from the private bar. Reductions in legal services will increase cost in other safety net programs and delay access to justice to everyone who needs access to our courts.

CCADV stands ready to support HB5388 and additional funding measures for Connecticut's Legal Aid programs because we know that access to the courts is paramount to impoverished victims of domestic violence, who have no other means of obtaining the justice or services they so desperately require. We invite the Committee to reach out to CCADV for expertise on all legislation that potentially impacts the rights of victims of domestic violence, and look forward to a close working relationship in the future.