

Center for *Children's* Advocacy

University of Connecticut School of Law, 65 Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF RAISED BILL 5548, SECTION 2, AN ACT CONCERNING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

March 23, 2012

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a private, non-profit legal organization affiliated with the University of Connecticut School of Law. The Center provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. The Center also operates a Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic, which provides legal services specifically to teens throughout the state, including an office in Warren Harding High School in Bridgeport, CT. It is because of our advocacy work with teens who are victims of violence at both the individual and systemic levels that **we urge you to support section 2, paragraph 2 of An Act Concerning Domestic Violence. This provision will allow minors who are victims of violence to consistently and safely access relief from abuse¹.**

We thank the legislature for its wise decision to amend this statute during the 2011 legislative session to allow minors who are victims of dating relationship violence to access restraining orders. However, we feel that more is needed. Minors are also victims of violence from parents, persons with whom they have a child, relatives related by blood or marriage, persons whom they live with, and in some cases, spouses.² These minors should experience the same access to protection as those in dating relationships.

We see the kids who are victims of violence and are in need of protection from the Court. Below are two examples of youth who were treated very differently:

Jessica (not her real name) was seventeen years old when she came to our legal clinic to get help from an abusive mother. After a particularly violent argument with her mother she escaped and went to an Aunt's house. Her mother followed her to the Aunt's house and harassed her. The next day, with the help of one of our attorneys, she applied for a restraining order ("Application for Relief from Abuse") and received one. This allowed her to feel some measure of safety as she went to school and to her job. Our attorney then represented her to have guardianship transferred to an appropriate and safe adult.

On the other hand, Carla (not her real name), who was seventeen years old, came to our legal clinic to get help from an abusive father. She had recently told her parents that she was gay and as a result, they threatened to hurt her. Carla tried to apply for a restraining order against her parent but was told that she could not because she was not eighteen years old. She ended up leaving her home and moving from place to place out of fear for her safety.

In 2010, Break the Cycle, a leading, national nonprofit organization, released its annual state by state report card which graded states on how well they protect minors from abusive relationships. *Connecticut received a "C" while all of our neighboring states*

¹ Pursuant to Conn. Gen. Stat. § 46b-15(a).

² See Conn. Gen. Stat. § 46b-38a defining "Family or household member."



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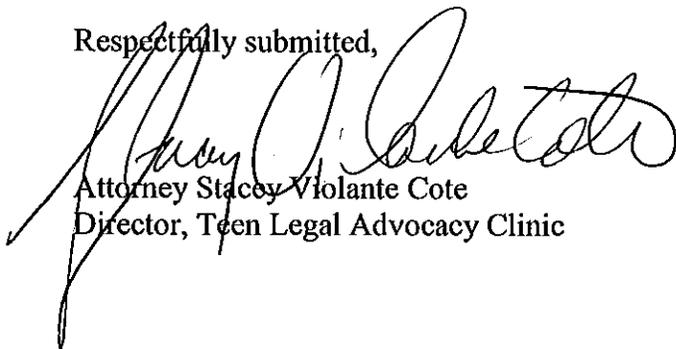
received a "B" or better.³ This is due in part to the lack of specificity in Connecticut laws regarding whether minors can apply to the CT Superior Court for relief from abuse on their own and/or who can file on their behalf.⁴ **The amendment in Sec. 2(2) addresses these concerns by allowing minors who are victims of abuse to ask the Superior Court for relief from such abuse.** This provision would assist vulnerable teens in getting necessary physical safety from their abusers.

As you are no doubt aware, as elsewhere, domestic violence in Connecticut is widespread and costly, both to the families that suffer it and to the State. Between October 1, 2009 and September 30, 2011, more than 85% of crime victims served in Connecticut with federal grant funds were domestic violence victims.⁵ Research suggests that the violence in these households often has deep roots. Violence in adult relationships may be part of a pattern that was established early, and may be more serious if established during adolescence.⁶ A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association concluded that "Violent relationships in adolescence can have serious ramifications for victims: Many will continue to be abused in their adult relationships and are at a higher risk for substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, and suicide."⁷

Both Carla and Jessica were high school students who were seeking safety from an abusive parent. One received protection, the other did not. We are aware of other teens who were not able to access safety from the Court. Connecticut can do better than this. Teens often fear involving officials in their family life. This fear is increased with uncertainty about what they can expect from those authority figures. This underscores the importance that the rules be clear and that they be consistently applied. The changes proposed in **section 2, paragraph 2 of An Act Concerning Domestic Violence** will go a long way in providing access to safety for minors who are victims of violence.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



Attorney Stacey Violante Cote
Director, Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic

³ See website of Break the Cycle, <http://www.breakthecycle.org/content/press-release-4610> (last visited 3/22/12).

⁴ See 2010 CT Report Card at Break the Cycle, <http://www.breakthecycle.org/system/files/pdf/Teen-Dating-Violence-State-Law-Report-Card-Connecticut-2010.pdf> (last visited 3/22/12).

⁵ Biennial Activities Report, Oct. 1, 2009 – Sept. 30, 2011, Office of Victim Services, State of Connecticut Judicial Branch.

⁶ V.A. Forshee et. al., Health Education Research, 11(3) 275-86 (1996); S.L. Feld and M.A. Strauss, Criminology, 27, 141-61 (1989).

⁷ Jay G. Silverman et. al., "Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy and Suicidality," Journal of the American Medical Association (2001).