



Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.

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Testimony of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services
In Support of SB 193, *An Act Concerning Mandated Reporters and Requiring Criminal History Records Checks for Youth Camp Employees and Volunteers*

Anna Doroghazi, Director of Public Policy and Communication
Select Committee on Children, February 28, 2012

Good afternoon, Senator Gerratana, Representative Urban, and members of the Select Committee on Children. My name is Anna Doroghazi, and I am the Director of Public Policy and Communication for Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS). CONNSACS is a statewide coalition of nine community-based sexual assault crisis services programs, which provide sexual assault counseling and victim advocacy to men, women, and children of all ages. During our last fiscal year, certified sexual assault victim advocates throughout the state provided hospital and court accompaniment, support groups, individual counseling, 24/7 hotline support, information, and referrals to over 5,700 victims and survivors of sexual violence. Over 1,000 of these victims were children and adolescents. Based on our experience working with victims of child sexual abuse and their families – and as mandated reporters – we would like to offer our support of SB 193, *An Act Concerning Mandated Reporters and Requiring Criminal History Records Checks for Youth Camp Employees and Volunteers*.

We cannot expect children to be responsible for their own safety. Our work with child victims and adult survivors of child abuse has shown again and again that children face myriad barriers to disclosing their victimization. Children may not be able to identify their abuse as such, and even if they do, they may not feel that they can trust an adult to protect them. Some offenders threaten their victims by saying that the victims or their families will be hurt if anyone finds out about the abuse. Many sexual offenders also groom their victims so that children believe the abuse is their fault or that they will get in trouble if they disclose. As adults, these survivors report that they were silent for years because they blamed themselves for the abuse or because when they tried to reach out for help, they were not believed. Children are not in a position to protect themselves against the adults who are hurting them. It is, therefore, incumbent on adults to identify abuse when it occurs, believe children when they disclose, and take appropriate action whenever they know or suspect that a child is being harmed.

Sadly, many adults do not live up to their responsibilities. A recent study found that while 91% of adults said that they would take action if they thought a child was being sexually abused, only 65% of respondents in that same study actually *did* take action when they were aware of a potential abuse situation, and a mere 37% took action by calling the police or the department of human or child services.¹

¹ Stop It Now! *What Do U.S. Adults Think about Child Sexual Abuse? Measures of Knowledge and Attitudes Among Six States*. Northampton: Stop It Now!, 2010.

Many variables influence whether or not an adult will report abuse, but commonly cited reasons for not reporting include: being unsure of whether or not abuse is occurring, not thinking that the abuse was serious enough, not wanting to meddle or get involved, not believing that a report will make a difference, and not understanding how to make a report.

In an ideal situation, a child who has been maltreated will make a disclosure to an adult who accepts their responsibility to report, understands how to make a report, and knows how to support the child at the time of the disclosure. Many aspects of this ideal response are beyond the purview of the legislature, but SB 193 removes a potential barrier to reporting by adding coaches, athletic directors, other sports-affiliated administrators, and youth camp administrators to the existing list of mandated reporters established in Sec. 17a-101(b). CONNSACS believes that adding these professionals to the list of mandated reporters will be effective by putting children in contact with more adults who have a known obligation to identify and respond to abuse. Coaches and camp directors spend extended periods of time with children, allowing them to build a trusting relationship, observe children on an ongoing basis, and be exposed to opportunities for a child to make a disclosure. Adding these individuals to the list of mandated reporters sends them the message that, yes, they are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of children, and they have a clear duty to respond when the children in their care experience harm.

To further enhance the effectiveness mandated reporting laws, CONNSACS recommends that the Committee consider amending SB 193 to require training for at least some of the professionals who are considered mandated reporters. Connecticut currently requires the Commissioner of Children and Families to “develop an educational training program for the accurate and prompt identification and reporting of child abuse and neglect. Such training shall be *made available* to all persons mandated to report child abuse and neglect...” [Sec. 17a-101(c)]. Instead of making training *available*, Connecticut could make the existing educational training program *required* for some or all mandated reporters.

There is precedent for requiring training for mandated reporters – this seems to be especially true of mandated reporters who are licensed through the state. Examples of states that include at least some state-licensed mandated reporters to complete training on child abuse identification and reporting include: New York, Massachusetts, Iowa, and Minnesota. Requiring training for even a portion of mandated reporters (such as those licensed through the state) could dramatically improve the overall response to victims of child abuse and neglect.

Training can also help mandated reporters understand that their obligation to children extends beyond a phone call or filling out paperwork. Mandated reporting is ultimately about a child who has already experienced abuse or neglect and who faces the potential of further harm if non-abusing adults cannot provide support and safety. Adults who work with children need to understand that their response to a child’s disclosure can either help or reinforce what offenders tell children – that they are at fault, that they are not important, and that their abuse is not something that should remain shrouded in secrecy.

CONNSACS also supports SB 193’s requirement that youth camp employees be required to undergo criminal background checks prior to the commencement of their employment. Camp

employees spend, literally, all hours of the day and night with the children in their care – much more time than teachers, DCF employees, daycare workers, and other professionals who are currently required to undergo background checks. This is a cost-effective and simple step toward ensuring that children are not left in the care of adults who wish to do them harm.

Finally, we want to recognize and appreciate the Committee's thoughtful consideration of mandated reporting. In the aftermath of abuse allegations at Penn State and Syracuse University, many states throughout the country have proposed changes to their mandated reporting laws. We believe that Connecticut's response, SB 193, takes simple, effective steps toward improving the safety of children, and we fully support its passage.

Thank you.

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