

Testimony House Bill 6702

I am the Coordinator of Court Advocacy for the Center for Women and Families in Bridgeport. We are a member agency of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and we serve Bridgeport, Fairfield, Stratford, Trumbull, Monroe, and Easton domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. Last year The Center for Women and Families served over 4200 clients and 180 of them were civil court clients that were assisted with restraining order applications. A significant barrier to leaving a domestic violence relationship for many of our clients is financial dependence on the abuser. Allowing restraining order applicants to seek financial assistance from the respondents is a key component to achieving not only victim safety but their children's safety as well. Thirty seven other states currently have some form of temporary spousal and child support in their civil restraining order process. Not addressing financial matters leaves survivors susceptible to becoming homeless or going back with the abuser.

Many of our criminal court clients' defendants are on probation. When a defendant violates their probation there is not a formal process for notifying the victim advocate. Many times even if the probation officer does not have current contact information for the victim, the victim advocate will have it and can reach out to them for safety planning purposes. If a defendant violated probation with another violent act or by not complying with treatment these are especially critical pieces of information for the victim to know.

Section 4 is in regards to guardian ad litem training. GALs are appointed in many domestic violence cases and not having proper training on the dynamics of domestic violence can result in victim blaming and making recommendations that may not take the abuser's coercive and manipulative tactics into account. Establishing training standards will allow GALs to better advocate for children in domestic violence cases.

There is currently language that protects survivors of domestic violence with early lease termination and we are seeking this statute to expand to survivors of sexual assault as well.

Battered women, battered women's counselor, and battered women's center are the current terms used throughout the domestic violence statutes and they are outdated and do not accurately reflect all clients. The language should be changed to domestic violence victim, domestic violence counselor, and domestic violence agency. Our direct client services as well as research demonstrates that women are not the only victims of domestic violence. Twenty percent of our agency's clients were male last year.

The Criminal Justice Policy Advisory Commission (CJPAC) currently consists of 21 members but only two represent community services. A third representative from offender and victim services with the private community should be added in order to have a comprehensive group of agencies representing all services being

provided in Connecticut. Victim service agencies can provide insightful feedback on what their clients are saying in regards to the treatment and intervention strategies being implemented with the defendants.

Section 17 requires the Chief Court Administrator to provide a secure conference room for victims of family violence crimes and advocates for victims of family violence crimes. There are currently five courthouses that do not provide any designated space for victims and four courthouses that provide space that is shared with another department within the court. This means that there are many victims that are sitting in the hallway with the abuser and not having a space to speak confidentially with their advocate. A survivor of domestic violence can not be appropriately served in this way. Telling their story should be done in a comfortable, safe way. Family Violence Victim Advocates statutorily can provide confidential services for clients yet that is impossible without having a space to do so.

Proposed bill 6702 addresses firearms in sections 18-19. There is currently a loophole within the language that allows defendants two days to forfeit their firearms after a protective/restraining order is put in place. There is also no provision in regards to ensuring the offender has a police officer with him or her when retrieving the guns. We are seeking to close up this loophole to further protect not only the victims of domestic violence in these cases but the general public. The defendants should have police presence when transferring, delivering, or surrendering the firearms.

Section 20 addresses Court Support Services Department's batterer intervention programs. Connecticut is one of only six states that does not have standards for batterer intervention programs including not mandating BIP treatment providers to go through a certification process. The BIPs should be assessed so an evaluation can determine the effectiveness of the programs. Victim safety and offender accountability can not be achieved if the batterer intervention programs are not operating in an effective way.

The last section asks that the Chief Court Administrator assess the training programs for judges and Judicial Branch staff related to family violence. One third of criminal cases are domestic violence in nature. In 2012, almost 9,000 restraining orders were completed statewide. Domestic violence is a significant problem in the Connecticut court system and judges must be properly trained to handle these cases.

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