

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Public Hearing
February 11, 2014

Testimony of:
Letamarie Highsmith
Jane Doe No More, Board of Director Member

Representative Willis, Senator Cassano and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 5029 An Act Concerning Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence on Campus. My name is Letamarie Highsmith and I serve on the board of directors of Jane Doe No More, a 501c3 charity founded right here in Connecticut in 2007 and born out of Connecticut resident, Donna Palomba's, experience of a horrific home invasion and sexual assault followed by traumatic re-victimization at the hands of law enforcement and other professionals. In 2007, Donna's case garnered national attention and was the impetus for the passing of Senate Bill 1500. This bill removed the statute of limitations on sexual assault cases involving DNA evidence in the state of Connecticut. Donna's perpetrator was caught 11 years after the crime, but not before he attacked again and again, ultimately leading to the attempted kidnapping and rape of a 17 year old girl.

Unfortunately, the stigmas that surround rape continue to make it the most misunderstood and unreported crime in this country. Just last month President Obama called for a Renewed Call To Action and released a report with staggering statistics on the human toll this crime takes emotionally, physically and financially. Female college students are particularly vulnerable; 1 in 5 will be sexually assaulted, most likely by someone they know. And that perpetrator will likely go on to rape again and again. Perpetrators not brought to justice leave all of us more vulnerable. That is why Jane Doe No More is on a mission to improve the way society responds to victims of sexual assault through education, awareness, advocacy and support.

When I first learned of Jane Doe No More and its vital mission I knew I had to get involved. I stand before you not only as a board member but also a survivor of sexual assault. Three years ago we launched our groundbreaking R.A.P.E. Outreach program. We are Raising Awareness through Personal Experience. Today, there are 23 women and men ages 22 to 64 who have come forward and gone on to find their voice through our professional development program. These individuals have become part of our vocal, vibrant and visible survivor community. Our faces and voices are seen and heard on college campuses and the impact is profound. We are empowering other victims – particularly those still suffering in silence – to come forward, regain control, and begin or advance their own healing. We are ending the silence. No more shame. No more blame. No more fear.

We all know that knowledge is power. The prevention of sexual assault is the ultimate goal. We offer self-defense classes for women and girls at no cost through our Escape Alive Survival Skills program in partnership with East Coast Training Systems. Unlike other self-defense classes, we begin with an education portion where survivors from our Outreach team share their stories. We have produced public service announcements in partnership with WFSB 3 to raise awareness about this program throughout Connecticut. It is highly successful and in great demand.

We recognize that a collaborative team approach is the only way to tackle a problem as complex and deeply rooted as the insidious crime of rape. The Jane Doe No More team is comprised of law enforcement leaders, educators, attorneys, business and marketing professionals, survivors and advocates. In 2010, we worked with Quinnipiac University's film professors and students, along with veteran filmmakers led by Richard Dobbs, director of over 30 episodes of Law & Order and Law & Order: SVU. We developed and produced enhanced training for law enforcement and first responders in the form of a powerful 8-minute video 'Duty Trumps Doubt'. Jane Doe No More presented this award winning video at the International Association Chiefs of Police conference. Today this video is in over 2,500 police departments throughout the country and is often used as part of roll-call training. It is our goal to create specific videos for every audience including college students, educators, legal professionals, campus security, administrators, survivors and their families. The many testimonials endorsing Duty Trumps Doubt underscore the profound and emotional connection made by viewing this video verses other types of text-based training.

In the spirit of collaboration, we strongly support HB 5029. Our desire is to use our expertise to work with all appropriate constituents and organizations as you craft the legislation and moving forward. Together we will make Connecticut the leader in addressing sexual assault and intimate partner violence on college and university campuses.

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Fairfield
UNIVERSITY

Department of Public Safety

It has been a pleasure having Jane Doe No More on our campus at Fairfield University for the past three years. Each of their presentations has had tremendous student participation, so much so that we've needed to find a larger venue for the event each year. They are an important organization helping today's society deal with the crime of sexual assault. We know that the crime of sexual assault is the most underreported crime especially on college campuses. Jane Doe No More raises awareness and empowers people to come forward and begin the healing process by providing information and resources.

Todd A. Pelazza

Director of Public Safety

Fairfield University



TESTIMONIALS

"I have never met people with more heart in my life. Jane Doe No More isn't just a name, it is a presence. The energy that surrounds Jane Doe No More is one of optimism, compassion, enthusiasm, and camaraderie that is completely contagious and inspiring"

-Brittney Kilfeather, Volunteer

"I believe in the mission of Jane Doe No More. I am continuously amazed when I see firsthand the hard work and dedication our volunteers and employees put forth on a daily basis to make Jane Doe No More the success it is today".

-Kathy McPadden, Board of Directors

"I volunteer for Jane Doe No More because I wanted the opportunity to reach out to others. I know what it's like to feel lost in this world and I've had my share of shame and guilt since my rape. Jane Doe No More gave me a voice, and helped take away the shame I felt as a result of the trauma that happened to me at age 13. I use that voice so that people who feel that their lives are over can see that they, too, can be beautiful again."

-Kate, RAPE Outreach Team member

"Jane Doe No More has given me the strength to shine! Being involved with JDNM has given me a voice and allows my story and my voice to help end the silence of sexual assault. Jane Doe No More reminds me that I am strong, powerful and brave. I feel so very lucky to be a part of this awesome organization that is truly changing lives".

-Sara, RAPE Outreach Team member

"Wow, the video Duty Trumps Doubt dispels the myths about sexual assault that are not only damaging to the victims but also dangerous to society's understanding of sexual violence. A must see for law enforcement!"

-Chief Anthony J. Silva, Director, RI Municipal Police Academy

"Duty Trumps Doubt is right on point. How we initially conduct business as a police officer and as a person will have a lasting effect on the victim, on the crime scene, the prosecution and ultimately on the perception of the police. The video provides a very important message that we can all learn from, even after being involved in the law enforcement profession for over 35 years."

-Jim Peschong, Asst. Chief of Police, Lincoln, Nebraska

"I have two sons, ages 14 and 15, who heard you speak. It is apparent that the school is still buzzing about your visit. My sons tell me that your impact was HUGE and EMOTIONAL and MEANINGFUL and that boys and girls alike are still talking about how they felt that was the best assembly ever.....ever!"

-Parent of Students, The TAFT School, Watertown, CT



Improving the way society responds to victims of sexual assault

TESTIMONIALS

"I initially learned about the program via Channel 3's Public Service Announcement. I was curious and decided to investigate. I felt the program would be worthwhile, especially when I learned it was funded in part by the Petit Family Foundation and Sikorsky (I'm a former UTC/P&W employee).

Although my 18-year old daughter did not initially want to attend (Mom, really), I told her that was not an option. In my view, arming her with this information was no different than having her vaccinated! I viewed it as for her protection, especially since she leaves for college in a few weeks.

My daughter and I both came away from the class empowered with useful information/techniques and we're both grateful that we attended. This program would be worthwhile even if I was required to pay to attend. Women must learn techniques to keep themselves safe and to escape a bad situation should it arise. I simply can't thank you enough for this valuable public service. Your staff members are to be commended for a job well done!"

-Terry & Marisa Wagner (Mom/daughter) Marlborough, CT, Escape Alive Participants

"This was the best class I ever went to, I feel empowered. I wish I had taken my daughters. Great Job!"

- Ann Cianciolo, Escape Alive Participant

"The Escape Alive team is AMAZING! Thank you for coming to our school to help our girls learn the importance of awareness and how to defend themselves! Words cannot express our gratitude!"

-Isabel Nunes-Siraco, Escape Alive Participant

"The women who shared their stories were amazing and inspiring! And their stories prove it could happen to anyone - all women need to take this class!"

-Heather Anderson

"This class not only taught me many great ways to escape from a dangerous situation, but also how to avoid those situations all together by being aware of my surroundings. I have also brought my 18 year old daughter with me to a couple classes. She is a college student in RI and sometimes has to walk through campus alone. I worry just a little bit less knowing that she has some really great self-defense tools to carry with her everywhere she goes."

- Sandy Kearney, Escape Alive Participant