

Testimony of Celestina Harrington in support of S.B. 31, An Act Concerning Continued Delivery of Legal Services to the Poor (March 10, 2014 Judiciary Committee)

My name is Celestina Harrington and I am here to tell you how legal services helped me and my children.

When my husband and I got married, we were both working and had a good life. We lived in New Jersey. My husband adopted my two older daughters and we had another one.

Unfortunately, he lost his job after a few years. We didn't have enough money and moved to CT to live with his family. That's when things got bad. I found work and started studying, but my husband refused to work. Even though I brought home a paycheck and loved my husband, he and his family treated my daughters and me like unwanted guests. They wouldn't allow us to eat without their permission and yelled at me and each other all the time. My daughters were depressed and we all felt trapped.

I knew that I was unhappy, but I was scared to leave. My husband had always made all the decisions and I didn't know what would happen to my family if I left. I ended up going to the Susan B. Anthony domestic violence shelter. They helped me understand that I didn't deserve to be treated that way and told me that I could talk to a lawyer. That's when I met Dahlia Grace, an attorney at Connecticut Legal Services.

Attorney Grace came to the shelter to talk to me. I had a lot of questions because I had never been to court before. I didn't know what would happen to my children or how a divorce worked, but she explained.

Eventually, I finally accepted that my husband would never change and asked Attorney Grace for help. She helped me file my divorce and worked with my ex-husband to agree on what each of us would do for our children. When my husband refused to pay child support, she went to court until he did. My divorce took a year to finish. Throughout that year, she was patient with me. She always answered my questions and told me what was going on.

Now my daughters and I live in Winsted in our own apartment. My children are happy because they know that they are safe. They are on the honor roll at school and are adjusting to their new lives. I finished up my cosmetology degree and have a job. We have a good life.

When I think of my divorce, I am grateful that I had help from Attorney Grace even though I didn't have money. I wouldn't have been able to do it by myself and I don't know what would have happened. I want her to always be there to help other women like me.