



Testimony of the Women's Center of Greater Danbury  
In Support of SB 203 AAC A Statewide Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness Program  
Melanie Danyliw, Director of Training & Program Development, Legislative Liaison  
Kelly Mullins, Program Manager of Education & Outreach  
The Children's Committee, February 27, 2014

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and honorable members of The Children's Committee, my name is Melanie Danyliw, Director of Training & Program Development and legislative liaison at the Women's Center of Greater Danbury, a member agency of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS) and the CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) providing sexual assault and domestic violence services throughout upper Fairfield and lower Litchfield counties. I am submitting this testimony with my colleague, Kelly Mullins, our Program Manager of Education, to support the goal of SB 203 to provide child sexual abuse and assault awareness programs in elementary schools, to highlight the local resources already available through CONNSACS member programs in achieving this goal, and to urge the inclusion of our experience in implementing the provisions of SB 203.

The Women's Center's elementary school outreach includes single and multi-session curricula dealing with child sexual assault from several perspectives. Our safe/unsafe/confusing touch curricula explore, in an age-appropriate way, behaviors and words that – "because they do not respect your body or your feelings", violate rights to privacy and safety; ways to extricate from risky situations; and how to access help. These programs are formatted as interactive puppet shows for the youngest children. For older elementary grades, these dangers are also expanded upon in our internet safety curricula.

As our child sexual assault programs are often part of a multi-session program, these concepts are also reinforced through accompanying bullying and bystander programs. Primary prevention, meanwhile, which focuses on building social skills and character strengths that reduce a child's vulnerability to be victimized or engage in unhealthy behavior in the first place....before there is risk or abuse....is part of every curricula as well as offered as stand alone programs.

Concurrent teacher and parent modules are offered so that concepts taught to the students can be infused into other curricula and classroom activity or reinforced at home and so that adults can recognize warning signs of victimization or perpetration, handle a disclosure correctly, access help for the child, and provide supportive environments post-disclosure. In fact, we offer a *Creating a Trauma Sensitive Classroom* training for teachers that addresses, among other trauma, accommodating the needs of child sexual assault survivors and children who have witnessed domestic violence. Professional and parent programs also include primary prevention – raising strong, healthy, resilient children.

Importantly, our adult programs also explore warning signs of sexually problematic behavior in adults and youth so that the adult can intervene in a safe, effective and responsible manner. While our student-based programs can provide children with strategies to be safe, their most significant impact is giving the child the awareness, the words and permission to disclose. Given the power differential between children and abusers (even when they are older adolescents), educating adults about the critical role such proactive intervention plays in ending child sexual abuse is integral to keeping children safe.

During fiscal year 2012-13, the Women's Center provided 47 elementary school programs to 3498 students in our 13 town service area. We also provided 196 programs for 5546 middle school student

contacts and 233 programs for 7305 high school student contacts. These statistics are representative of previous years' outreach. The gap between elementary versus secondary school contacts that the statistics illustrate is representative of some of barriers and difficulties we face in doing outreach to elementary schools, including:

- The resistance of some administrators and parents to inclusion of these programs in their curricula and/or difficulties of inclusion of these topics due to time restraints and other curricula demands: Often, when there is a willingness to present these topics, time limitations are tackled by using a large-audience format. We are fortunate to have an interactive theatre troupe, *ACT OUT*, that can sometimes present this subject matter in an engaging manner. That format is the exception, however, and large group presentations, while better than no exposure, are limited in their effectiveness. Rare teacher training for reinforcing content in the small group classroom setting further compromises the impact of such types of education. Parents who attend the as-rare concurrent parent workshops are usually the parents who are already well versed in the topic. We have had success, however, working with some school districts to cover this material in a more universal Parent University format; nevertheless, incorporating parents is difficult.
- The constraints on our ability to both cultivate schools and parents so there is an understanding of the need for and nature of our programs and to then respond to school requests for education given the fact that we have only 2.5 community education staff

Lastly, we have always emphasized the efficacy of using our agency as a tool for child sexual assault awareness education because of the counseling support that our agency can immediately provide. Our educators are certified sexual assault/domestic violence counselor advocates and can immediately respond to crisis in the child and safety planning needs and provide the referral to our agency. In addition, our child advocate can provide on-going trauma-informed counseling to a child survivor as well as affected siblings while our adult counselors can respond to the needs of caregivers. As we are part of our area multi-disciplinary team for the investigation of child abuse, our services are part of a coordinated community response. Whether education or counseling, our services are free.

In conclusion, considering the resistances we have encountered in our outreach, we are grateful that SB 203 can provide the weight of authority for inclusion of child sexual assault programming in the elementary school setting at multiple levels. Given our experience and expertise in providing such educational programs and the support services that consequent disclosures demand, we also strongly urge the committee to consider CONNSACS' member programs as an important resource in the development and implementation of its goals.

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