

**Testimony of Laura Cordes, Executive Director
Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
SB 636, An Act Concerning Affirmative Consent
February 20, 2015**

Good Afternoon Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Willis and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee. My name is Laura Cordes and I am the Executive Director of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS). CONNSACS is the state's leading voice to end sexual violence and the coalition of our state's nine community-based sexual assault crisis services programs, which provide free and confidential sexual assault crisis counseling and victim advocacy to thousands of women, men and children, of all ages, each year.

Certified sexual assault victim advocates provided hospital, police and court accompaniment, support groups, individual counseling, 24/7 hotline support, information and referrals to victims and survivors of sexual violence throughout the state, and community education and professional training presentations. CONNSACS also coordinates the Connecticut College Consortium Against Sexual Violence a unique and incredibly dedicated network of representatives from both private and public colleges and universities who meet throughout the academic school year to exchange ideas and support each other in the work to improve the response to and prevention of sexual violence.

Thank you for your continued commitment to addressing campus sexual violence, your support and interest in the well being of survivors and the opportunity to speak today in support of raised SB 636. I also want to acknowledge the efforts of Senator Mae Flexer and Representative Greg Haddad in sponsoring the bill and lastly I want to thank the students and survivors who know their communities the best, for their advocacy and testimony today.

We have taken significant steps forward in our state to address sexual violence. Colleges and universities are listening more closely to students and survivors and deepening partnerships with our member community based sexual assault crisis service programs while working hard to implement both new federal and state policies.

A best practice and indeed a factor that we looked at in our last *Campus Report Card*, was whether or not each institution defined consent in their sexual assault policy. That was four years ago. Today, not only do campuses have consent policies in place, many have adopted affirmative consent policies.

It is our belief that affirmative consent policy is an important tool that can help campus communities re-frame consent (something given freely without coercion or manipulation) promote dialogue about healthy sexuality, and increase offender accountability.

Although much work has been done to address victim blaming, the prevailing narrative continues to place the burden on the victim to demonstrate how they fought hard enough, screamed loud enough

or protested the assault assertively enough. The idea that a victim is responsible for their assault is reinforced by a system that holds them responsible for proving that their assailant was in fact in violation of school conduct. Victim blaming lengthens and complicates the healing process for victims, keeps them from coming forward to seek services and report, and negatively feeds into a culture that minimizes sexual violence.

Unfortunately the "no means no" standard and the idea that the absence of no equals consent, continues to de-legitimizes victims and the cases in which victims could not, or did not, say "no", or actively resist. When a standard requires that affirmative actions are necessary for consent, victims who did not say "no", but who also did not say "yes", are protected, and moreover those investigating and adjudicating these cases will begin to ask the accused some critical questions: *did she say yes? what steps did you take to determine consent? how did she give consent?*

Adopting affirmative consent language among all institutions of higher education will create consistency throughout our state, improve the way sexual assault cases are investigated and adjudicated, while encouraging much needed conversation about consent and healthy relationships.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have.