



Testimony of the Women's Center of Greater Danbury
In support of **House Bill 6498 *An Act Concerning the Timely Transfer and Processing of Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kits***

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February 17, 2015

Senator Larson, Representative Dargan and honorable members of the Public Safety and Security Committee, my name is Melanie Danyliw, Director of Training & Program Development and legislative liaison at the Women's Center of Greater Danbury, a nonprofit social service agency - and member agency of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS) - providing sexual assault services throughout upper Fairfield and lower Litchfield counties. During the 2013-14 fiscal year, the Women's Center helped 521 victims of sexual abuse through 3,160 crisis and individual and group counseling sessions and 1,981 hospital, police, court and multidisciplinary team advocacy contacts. Because of our 40 years experience in this field, we strongly support the establishment of timelines for the handling of sexual assault evidence kits as outlined in HB 6498 not only as way to ensure preservation and integrity of evidence that may be critical to the arrest, prosecution and conviction of rapists but also as a way to uphold victims' rights in that process.

Whether on the hotline immediately post-assault or in the hospital emergency department, our counselor advocates educate victims of sexual assault about options and processes: that completion of the kit is independent of the police report; that the kit can be labeled anonymously; that the kit will be sent to the state forensic lab where the integrity of the evidence will be maintained by correct preservation and secure storage; and, if anonymous or a police report has not been made, that it will be held for up to sixty days while the victim decides what to do.

Sexual assault is a traumatic experience - a life-threatening event that can overwhelm a victim's normal coping abilities and impact their capacity to make informed decisions. We often see victims confused, afraid and therefore hesitant to go to the hospital, complete the kit and/or report to the police. Sharing this information empowers that victim already determined to use the criminal justice system in the knowledge that her/his courage in coming forward will be honored. Significantly, this same information *often* makes the critical difference in changing the mind of that victim-in-crisis refusing to have a kit done - thereby eliminating any chance to collect evidence and potentially negatively impacting the criminal justice process should they later decide to proceed. As importantly, completion of the kit is also a powerful step in recovery as the victim takes constructive control of her/his victimization.

However, if the kit is not transferred in time to ensure that the evidence will be held in a secure environment adequate for its preservation, and if any evidence not dried at the emergency department - such as moist specimens - is not immediately processed at the lab, evidence can deteriorate and its integrity be compromised or even rendered useless. Preservation is the expectation of the victim whether s/he immediately makes a police statement or delays in order to process options when trauma is mitigated. The integrity of the evidence is also the foundation of justice. Timely transfer and processing of sexual assault evidence kits, therefore, are critical.

Yet, despite timely transfer, storage and analysis of evidence being so strongly reflected as recommended practice in the *State of Connecticut Technical Guidelines for Healthcare Response to Victims of Sexual Assault* (developed by the Commission on the Standardization of Evidence Collection Sexual Assault Investigation in accordance with C.G.S. Sec19a-112a), preliminary investigation indicates that hundreds of sexual assault evidence kits in our state are not being transferred and/or processed.

In its establishment of a timeline for transfer and processing of sexual assault evidence kits, **HB 6498** provides an immediate remedy to the continuation of this problem; therefore, the Women's Center strongly urges support. Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.