

Testimony of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc. (CONNSACS)

Department of Public Health, Rape Crisis Line Item -HB 6824

Laura Cordes, Executive Director

Appropriations Committee

March 6, 2015

Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Laura Cordes and I am the Executive Director of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS). CONNSACS is the coalition of Connecticut's nine community-based sexual assault crisis services programs. Our mission is to end sexual violence and ensure high quality, comprehensive and culturally-competent sexual assault victim services.

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you this evening. On behalf of our member programs and the victims and survivors that we serve, I want to thank you for supporting those who are work every day with victims and survivors of rape and child sexual abuse. We ask that you support rape crisis line item at the FY 15 level to help meet the demand for services, and requests for prevention education and training from organizations and agencies as well as schools and universities.

Over the last three years sexual assault crisis services programs have seen a 20% increase in the demand for services. Up until last year, our funding had been at the lowest point in over twenty years- and less than the nominal amount provided through the rape crisis line item in 1990.

Thankfully, last year the legislature began to address this underfunding of these vital services by increasing this line item. With an increase in a demand on services we can't afford to take a step back and decrease funding to FY 14 levels as is proposed in the Governor's budget.

We understand and respect the current fiscal reality and budget constraints that the state faces, and we are very thankful for every dollar of funding that we receive. We are, however, concerned about the future of sexual assault crisis services programs and the survivors they serve in light of the proposed cut of over 1/3 of this line item.

Sexual assault is widespread; nearly 20% of Connecticut residents have been the victim of sexual assault. The physical and emotional trauma has a devastating impact on victims and their families. Rape victims face a long and difficult healing process. In the aftermath, they need support. CONNSACS and its member centers meet victim's needs in a way no one else does.

In order to best serve sexual assault victims and survivors within diverse communities and to effectively advocate for them with in complex systems and institutions, sexual assault crisis counselors and advocates must continue to address the unique and emerging needs of victims including, victims of child sexual abuse, campus sexual assault, prison sexual assault, and military sexual assault.

The President and lawmakers, both federally and here in Connecticut, have made a commitment to preventing sexual violence and improving the response to victims. We recognize that by working together to effect change for victims and the culture - the behaviors and attitudes that diminish victim's experiences and dismiss offender behavior- that we are creating communities where victims will feel safer coming forward and reaching out for services and justice. We continue to see an increase in demand for services and training particularly from college campuses. In order to fully affect the change we all seek, sexual violence prevention and victim advocacy and services will require a deeper investment in community based sexual assault crisis services and training and technical assistance programs for community leaders and first responders.

Since the beginning of this current fiscal year and the passage of Connecticut PA 11-14, which addresses campus sexual violence, CONNSACS and our member programs have:

- Served over 400 college survivors of sexual assault
- Provided nearly 100 trainings for the faculty, staff, students, and administrators at campuses throughout the state on topics ranging from Campus Response Team development, Bystander Intervention, State and Federal sexual violence policies and trauma-informed responses for students.
- Participated in the development of MOUs as established under CT's new law
- Participated in each active Campus Response/Resource Teams
- Hosted a day long statewide conference on campus sexual violence. This conference had representatives from 25 of the 35 higher education institutions in the state of CT and was attended by over 125 people. Twelve workshops were offered and speakers from the Victim's Rights Law Center, Know your IX and the Stalking Resource Center and Men Can Stop Rape
- CONNSACS continues to coordinate the Connecticut College Consortium to End Sexual Violence which brings together representatives from both public and private institutions to exchange ideas, and share information about best practice in prevention and victim support. Meeting attendance has double since last year.

During our last fiscal year, certified sexual assault victim advocates provided hospital, police and court accompaniment, support groups, individual counseling, 24/7 hotline support, information, and referrals to over 7,200 victims and survivors of sexual violence throughout the state. Advocates at local sexual crisis services programs provide services at all hours of the day and night- crisis counseling, support groups, accompaniment to hospitals, courts and police stations-all free of charge and without any waiting lists. This kind of response is unique to sexual assault victim advocates, and it has a long-term positive impact on the physical health and emotional well-being of survivors of sexual violence.

Our advocates frequently answer calls and get out of bed at 3am or go to the hospital with a victim for three, four, five or more hours to provide support during a forensic evidence exam. We help survivors

understand their options and navigate a complex medical and criminal justice system. When a sexual assault survivor needs someone to talk to on a Sunday afternoon, victim advocates are available to take their call. Our advocates staff one of the nation's only statewide Spanish-language rape crisis hotlines; run support groups; provide individual and group counseling; participate in the Multi-Disciplinary Teams that review child abuse cases; undertake community awareness campaigns; and provide education and training to schools, law enforcement, service providers, and community members.

In client feedback surveys,

- over 95% of respondents said that the services they received at sexual assault crisis services programs met or exceeded their expectations;
- 97% of clients agree or very much agree that their counselor/advocate helped them to understand and manage their feelings; and
- 97% said their counselor/advocate helped them understand the effects of trauma and provided information about available resources, options, and additional services.

When our dollars are stretched further and further, positions at our programs are left vacant, and victims must wait for services and other providers and partners must wait for training. When budget constraints require staff to work long hours and forgo increased pay, many will not receive a livable wage, and qualified advocates have to choose between the important work that they love and leaving for higher paying jobs in other sectors.

Please continue to support these critical services for victims and survivors of rape and child sexual abuse by funding sexual assault crisis services at the FY 15 level in the Department of Public Health budget.

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to speak with you this evening.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide you with any additional information about the importance of full funding for rape crisis services.

Thank you.

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