



Testimony Regarding

HB 5044, AA Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2017

Department of Social Services Budget

Appropriations Committee February 11, 2016

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Flexer, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Hartley, Senator Kane, Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Cuevas, Senator Markley, Representative Minor, Representative O'Neill and members of the committee. Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury, Inc. provided life-saving services to over 3,154 people in FY 15. Service provided include emergency shelter, 24-hour crisis services, legal advocacy for both criminal and civil matters, advocacy surrounding benefits, housing and job training, individual and peer group counseling and child advocacy including art therapy. We also provided presentations to over 2,754 adults and 14,464 students (ages 5-21) through our community education program. We serve victims and their children in the towns of Bethlehem, Cheshire, Middlebury, Naugatuck, Prospect, Southbury, Waterbury, Watertown, Wolcott and Woodbury.

We respectfully ask that you carefully consider any cuts to an already stressed nonprofit human services system that provides help to victims of domestic violence. We already struggle to meet the high demand for services and need to help keep victims safe. Further cuts to this system will be devastating and leave many victims and their children with no place to turn for help.

We also respectfully oppose the proposed block grant system for human services, including domestic violence services, and ask that you please consider its potential impact on an already fragile system and our ability to ever effect change to the funding stream for their services.

Current financial realities of domestic violence services

In fiscal year 2015, 78 adults and 64 children sought emergency shelter with us because they faced physical danger and had no other safe place to go. Victims and their children receive life-saving services including counseling, support groups, safety planning and court advocacy while staying in shelter.

Throughout the year our shelter ran at 106% capacity. When we are over capacity, our shelter staff will utilize rollaway beds placed in common areas, couches or trundle beds to handle the overflow. Victims stayed in our shelter for an average of 23 days. In addition to those staying in shelter, we spent \$1,800 to house victims in hotels who we could not accommodate in shelter due to lack of space. Housing victims in a hotel is both temporary and unsafe. Demand for shelter continues to be a pressing need in our area.

There is definitely an increased awareness about our shelter related to our participation in our local Coordinated Access Network and in general, the new 211 referral process. Safe Haven makes every effort to increase awareness about our services through outreach at local health fairs, our local hospitality center, etc.

Victims are presenting with more acute, complex needs, such as serious health challenges, high risk pregnancies, mental health and substance use issues that require longer shelter stays and additional residential supports until stable, appropriate housing can be identified and secured. Those needs coupled with reductions to the other human services needed by victims, like behavioral health services, and a lack of affordable housing often leaves victims with no place else to go. Either they stay in shelter or they return home to their abuser – a potentially fatal option.

As we struggle to meet a demand for shelter that is significantly higher than what is available, we are also asked to provide those services for a fraction of the actual cost. Current state funding levels provide approximately \$7 per day per person housed in emergency shelter. This funding is expected to cover mortgage/lease payments, utilities and staffing. This funding is not an accurate reflection of those costs. The approximate cost to house someone in our shelter per day is \$70. This continues to be a challenge as we must spend increasing amounts of staff time and resources to do extensive private fundraising to fill this gap, thus diverting further from direct services for victims and their children.

Impact of proposed block grant system

The proposed system of block granting as it currently appears will result in little to no transparency for us to understand what, if any, funding will be allocated to our services. The main source of state funding for domestic violence services is included in the “domestic violence shelters” line item historically in the Department of Social Services (DSS) budget. This funding covers shelter operations, including mortgage/lease payments and utilities, as well as shelter and some advocate staffing. This line item, along with 16 other DSS line items, is proposed to be moved under the newly created “agency operations” line item.

Under the proposed system, it will be up to the Commissioner to determine what constitutes a “core service” of DSS and whether or not services for victims of domestic violence should be included as part of those core services. If these services are considered “core,” there would still not be a clear indication of how much of the department’s funding will be directed to domestic violence. The Commissioner could decide to fund those services at increased or decreased levels from what the Legislature has historically allocated to them. It is also unclear when those decisions would be made and how far in advance we would be informed of a cut.

In short, such a system with a lack of transparency will leave providers and advocates in the dark when it comes to funding. And if an agency Commissioner decides to provide less funding or no funding for a given service, to whom would we advocate? The Commissioner and Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management are not elected to office; they work for the Governor. The Governor is one person. Instead of having 151 legislators, including those we elect to represent us in the Greater Waterbury area, to debate an issue and make a decision about priorities, only one person’s priorities will prevail. It will be difficult for advocates or victims to ever effect change under such a system.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

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