

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



Formerly the Women's Center of SE CT

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Flexer, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Formica, Representative Ziobran, Representative Hewitt, Representative France, Representative McCarty Representative Orange, Representative Ryan, Representative Urban, and members of the committee. **Safe Futures, Inc. provides life-saving services to approximately 5,000 people every year in all 21 towns of Southeastern Connecticut.** Our services include domestic violence shelter, hotlines, transitional housing, supportive housing, court advocacy, supportive individual and group counseling, outreach, and prevention education.

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, 211 adults and 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.

Demand for shelter has never been higher. We have been operating our shelter at greater than 100% capacity for 5 straight years, and have averaged 120% capacity for the last 6 months. That means that more often than not, women are sleeping on pullout couches or air mattresses, and kids are in portable cribs. We have converted a common room to another bedroom, and last year, **we paid for an additional 383 bed nights in hotels and other locations throughout the area – all in an attempt to ensure that anyone who needed us were safe.** These additional clients cause us to incur substantial additional costs, not just for the shelter, but also for the staff time, transportation, basic needs supplies, and other support costs to serve clients off-site at several locations. Housing victims in a hotel or other locations is both temporary and unsafe.

Victims are staying longer – about twice as long as they did just 7 years ago- due to the sluggish employment/economic conditions and lack of affordable housing in our region.

We do not expect these conditions to improve any time soon. Increased awareness, both statewide and nationally; improved coordination with law enforcement through our Lethality Assessment Program; diminishing human service options; as well as the local economy are all contributing to these high levels of demand.

Our transitional housing program is unable to keep up with the need for affordable housing and services for those in shelter. We serve between 35 and 50 women and children per year, but government funding, from all sources, has not increased in more than 10 years. As a result, another transitional housing program had to close about 6 years ago and we are now the only transitional housing program for victims of domestic violence in all of eastern Connecticut.

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 repair and replacement costs on a very old building, utilities and staffing. This funding is not an accurate reflection of those costs. 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 Southeastern Connecticut 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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