

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

Dear Members of the Appropriation Committee:

The Center for Family Justice has provided life-saving services to victims and their children in the towns of Bridgeport, Stratford, Fairfield, Trumbull, Monroe & Easton. Our services include free and confidential counseling for adults and children, safety planning, Advocacy Services, Crisis and Safe Home Services, court advocacy services, support group services, self-sufficiency services, coordination of child forensic interviews, and other services necessary to ensure victims of domestic and sexual violence are having their needs met.

The Court Advocacy Unit through The Center for Family Justice has been and remains an essential and indispensable program, dedicated to working with and advocating for victims and survivors of domestic violence. Without the dedication and sincere efforts of the family violence victim advocates both in criminal and civil court, victims and survivors of domestic violence would be forced to navigate the long and tedious court process alone. Family violence victim advocates act as liaisons between victims and the court system, presenting a victim's wishes and concerns to prosecutors and the court. Essentially, we are the voices for those victims who cannot or do not feel safe speaking in open court with their abuser present. Throughout the entire court process, we assist and support victims of domestic violence, whether or not the victim is being exposed to this process for the first time or those who have been forced to endure the cycle of abuse for years.

On the day of arraignment, the first day a defendant is in court following an arrest, we review police reports and contact victims for essential information relevant to the case. In addition, we discuss the three different types of protective orders that could be issued and ask victims which order they would be most comfortable with. Although a protective order is automatically issued when an arrest occurs in a domestic violence incident, each victim, through the aid of his or her advocate, has the ability to be involved in the court process from the very beginning, notifying the court what he or she or thinks is appropriate. This information is relayed to the court, yet without the advocates to provide this crucial input, the court would not be fully informed of the desires and concerns of each individual victim. Victims will often disclose their belief that an offender requires or would benefit from substance abuse and/or mental health treatment or anger management classes. It is our job to present this vital information to the court, as the victim, who often knows and understands the needs of the offender more than anyone else, believes the offender requires services through court-mandated programs. Furthermore, in certain cases, victims are seeking restitution for property that was broken or damaged during the incident. We have the ability to present receipts and invoices to the court on behalf of the victim so they can be made whole again for any financial losses.

Following the arraignment day, we contact victims in an effort to communicate case updates and details regarding any programs or treatment the offender is receiving. In addition, at the

request of prosecutors and/or judges, we speak with individual victims to request input before court dates, specifically discussing the various ways in which a case can be resolved and if the victim would like to be present in court during sentencing. Victims will often initiate contact with us to request that we provide an input statement on their behalf prior to the court date. These efforts extend even further, as advocates partner with prosecutors to discuss nuances of each case as a means of ensuring victim safety and offender accountability. A victim's input regarding the disposition of the case is a crucial facet of the process, as prosecutors will often not go forward with a plea offer if the victim objects. The services we provide are not only beneficial, but critical to ensuring that victims of domestic violence remain in control, while also receiving vital support throughout the overwhelming, frustrating, and confusing court process.

Beyond the unique and direct advocacy provided to clients within and throughout the court process, we extend our services for both client-centered and trauma-informed advocacy by collaborating with both internal and outside agencies and providers. After assessing the needs of each individual victim, we will often refer that person for free and confidential counseling services with an advocate at our main office or assist them in calling our 24/7 hotline number if the victim requires shelter. On numerous occasions, victims have asked their advocate to sit with them while they call the hotline, and if not for the support of the advocate, that victim may never have taken the brave, yet difficult step to make that phone call. Additionally, we have contacted staff at the main office to request gift cards for clients and/or their children who have just escaped an abusive situation, yet do not even possess basic necessities. Providing victims with these gift cards, instead of merely handing them the items, restores a sense of dignity and control, as the individual can go to the store and choose items for themselves and their family. Although we are just one arm in a sea of moving parts in court, our continued communication with victims provides a link with various vital programs and services. As victim advocates in court, we cannot guarantee that victims' requests are always granted or that offenders are held as accountable as we see fit, but the least we can do is assure that each victim has a hand in navigating the court process from arraignment through disposition.

Client Story

Highlighting the impact of our services is a distinct and difficult, yet inspiring case that our office recently received. I was contacted by one of our domestic violence (DV) prosecutors to come to her office immediately. When I opened her office door, I saw one of my clients, sitting next to the prosecutor, in tears and visibly shaken. She had her two year old son on her lap and kept repeating, "He's going to kill me." She went on to state that her boyfriend, who had several DV cases on our docket, had someone blow up her car the night before and that she was terrified that he would kill her and their shared son. The boyfriend had an extensive history of gun and drug related charges. And most recently, was accumulating several domestic violence cases with this client as well. The prosecutor was very concerned about the situation and threw out the option of having the client participate with the CT State Witness Protection Program. The client was absolutely terrified and said she would do anything to ensure her and her child's safety. Within an hour, the client, her son and I were sitting with a State's Attorney Investigator at Superior Court going over information of how the Witness Protection Program

worked and what would be involved. She was told that she and her son would have to leave the area immediately and start life over with a new identity. I contacted our main office at The Center and was able to obtain several gift cards to Target and Stop and Shop to help her get some things to start off her new life. An officer with the State Witness Protection Program drove down from Hartford that day and met with us and outlined in detail on how they would get her out of the area and set her up in a location. In recent months, the client had previously received several sessions with the advocacy program at The Center and was at the point where she recognized that this was her opportunity to break free from her abuser once and for all. Within a few days, she was able to leave the vicinity of Bridgeport and was given an apartment that she would be able to sustain on her own. Two months later, I was able to touch base with her in court. She stated that she had recently gotten a full time job and was feeling safe after all the chaos that had gotten her to this point. In fact, she was excited for her new future and said it was the first time in years that she had felt free.

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.

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

The Center for Family Justice

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