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Testimony of Natasha M. Pierre, Esq., State Victim Advocate
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Good morning Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and distinguished members of the Committee on Children. For the record, my name is Natasha Pierre and I am the Victim Advocate for the State of Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **support** of:

> **House Bill No. 5140,** *An Act Concerning the Use of Therapy Animals to Comfort Children Testifying in Certain Criminal Prosecutions*

Crime victims in Connecticut have a state constitutional right to be reasonably protected from the accused throughout the criminal justice process. Currently, in cases where the victim of crime is also a minor, there are provisions that the court may offer as additional protections for the minor victim during testimony in a criminal prosecution. House Bill No. 5140 expands on those protections to include the use of a therapy animal to comfort the minor victim during testimony.

While the use of animals in a therapeutic setting is not a new concept, the use of a therapy animal during a criminal proceeding is increasingly growing across the nation. Programs have been implemented in twenty-nine states, including California, Texas, Arizona and Florida[1].

The benefits achieved by the use of a therapy animal are two-fold - it allows a minor victim to be more relaxed and experience less anxiety and stress during testimony, which in turn allows the minor victim to focus and recall information better. These benefits enhance the entire criminal justice process.

Minor victims of sexual assault, physical assault or child abuse deserve an environment within the criminal justice process that does not further traumatize them. Providing comfort animals could provide a nurturing, rather than traumatizing, environment for a minor victim.

I strongly urge the Committee's favorable report on House Bill No.5140. Thank you for consideration of my testimony.

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[1] http://courthousedogs.com/settings_where.html