



## 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 and members of the committee. During fiscal year 2015, The Women's Center provided life-saving services to over 26,817 individuals in our 13 town service area. All services provided were free, confidential, trauma-informed, and victim-centered. These services include emergency shelter, individual counseling, safety planning, court advocacy, hospital advocacy, support groups, crisis intervention through two 24 hour hotlines, lethality assessments, and educational and primary prevention programs. We serve victims and their children in 13 towns in the Greater Danbury area including Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Danbury, Kent, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Redding, Ridgefield, Roxbury, Sherman, and Washington.

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 strongly 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, 61 adults and 56 children sought emergency shelter with us because they faced physical danger and had no other safe place to go. While staying in our shelter, victims and their children have access to the wide variety of free services we provide, as listed above.

Throughout the year our shelter ran at 98% capacity and victims stayed in our shelter for an average of 91 days. In addition to those staying in shelter, we spent \$4,939 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 due to a lack of sustainable housing options in the Greater Danbury area. Demand for shelter has also increased in recent years due to more public awareness, educational programs, and outreach campaigns causing more women and children to leave abusive relationships and seek our services, including staying in our emergency shelter.

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 this demand for shelter, 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 does not even remotely cover the actual cost of sheltering victims since the approximate cost to house someone in our shelter per day is \$80. 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 Danbury 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.

Ann Rodwell-Lawton  
Director of Education, Training, & Outreach  
Women's Center  
Ann.rl@wcogd.org  
(203)731-5200