

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, Representative Betts, Representative Tercyak, and members of the committee. Prudence Crandall Center touched the lives of more than 8,000 people in FY 15. Included in that number are the nearly 160 domestic violence victims and their children who received our comprehensive and life-saving emergency shelter services. We primarily serve victims and their children in the towns of Plainville, Plymouth, Berlin, Kensington, Bristol, Terryville, Southington, New Britain and Burlington.

We respectfully ask that you carefully consider any proposed 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 effect change to the funding stream for their services.

Current financial realities of domestic violence services

In fiscal year 2015, 85 adults and 69 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.

For the past six months with little relief, our shelter has been filled to an average of 126% of capacity. When all of our 22 shelter beds are full, and the need is greater than our capacity, we use sofas or roll-away beds to allow families to stay in the shelter living room or in the children's playroom. When even those spaces are full, we have families stay on another floor in our support group room and even in the teen room. More often than not, in the last 6 months, all of these spaces have been fully occupied with families living in all of them.

Demand for shelter continues to be a pressing need in our area and statewide. Contributing factors include local and statewide efforts to raise awareness that have helped direct victims in need to our services, increased referrals from 211, and increased referrals directly from police departments through the Lethality Assessment Program (LAP). At the same time, the length of stay in our shelter continues to be over 55 days – there are not enough transitional housing beds or enough affordable housing to meet the need and allow people a safe, affordable next step from the emergency shelter. We provide 8 apartments of transitional housing for victims and their children and do not have any vacancies – if an apartment opens up, it is filled almost immediately.

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 leave victims with no place else to go. Either they stay in the shelter or they return 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 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 \$10. 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 central Connecticut 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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