

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.

New Horizons Domestic Violence Services provided life-saving services to over 1,038 victims of domestic violence in person and by phone in FY 15. Services provided include crisis intervention, counseling/support, civil court advocacy, victim's pet advocacy through coordination with Companions in Crisis, criminal justice, hospital/medical, information/referral, safety planning, transportation, victim advocacy, victim compensation, case management, emergency shelter, translation, Lethality Assessment Protocol coordination with local police, community outreach and education, support groups and individual counseling. We serve victims and their children in the towns of Cromwell, Portland, East Hampton, Middlefield, Middletown, Durham, Haddam, East Haddam, Killingworth, Chester, Deep River, Essex, Old Saybrook, Clinton and Westbrook.

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. The impact of such devastating cuts would be far-reaching, and could have adverse effects on generations to come. It can only serve to perpetuate a cycle in which children of victims of abuse are faced with such deleterious circumstances that they themselves suffer from trauma-related health concerns, substance abuse, mental illness and further exposure to abusive relationships. Due to already existing financial constraints we are paying entry level salaries to individuals who are expert in their work and have many years in service. Our ability to pay salaries commensurate with experience will be even further limited by any additional changes to the budget.

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, 32 adults and 26 children sought and received emergency shelter with us because they faced physical danger and had no other safe place to go. The majority stayed the full sixty days, limiting our ability to take in new residents at a higher volume. Victims and their children receive life-saving services including counseling, support groups, safety planning and court advocacy while staying in shelter. New Horizons is unique among domestic violence shelters in that we are part of a Federally Qualified Health Center, the Community Health Center, Inc., which provides comprehensive health services including medical, dental and behavioral health services

Throughout the year our shelter ran at 113% capacity. The additional 13% accounts for victims and children that we housed in motel rooms because our shelter was full. We pay for 1-2 nights until we are able to find them space at another domestic violence shelter in the state, secure them a bus ticket to a friend/ family member's house, or have them return home with a restraining order in place. However,

housing victims in a hotel is both temporary and unsafe. Victims stayed in our shelter for an average of 65 days. Demand for shelter continues to be a pressing need in our area. People tend to come to shelter because they have absolutely no other options. There is scarcity of affordable housing in CT that can be obtained in a timely matter for our clients. They may not have a friend or family member to stay with because the abuser knows where to find them. Since implementing a new community education and outreach position in March of 2015, people are more aware of our shelter services and are calling the hotline more and more to seek shelter. For instance, in FY2015 the hotline received 271 calls, and to date, it has received 186 calls in FY2016.

As you are aware, intimate partner violence does not exist in a vacuum. Many other significant health and social issues are often present, including mental health, substance abuse, homelessness and child abuse and neglect. This is evident when there is a single victim presenting, and only further multiplied when we consider a victim with one or more children under his or her care. 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 mortgage/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 \$14. 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. Furthermore, the success of this type of funding can be unpredictable and often requires a great deal of time and resources prior to funding being secured. This only serves to further exhaust our resources that are best allocated to direct service provision.

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. This level of discretion would leave an already vulnerable population at even higher risk of a lack of service provision that is counted upon to save lives. 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. This could potentially cause a crisis both for individual programs such as ours, as well as across the state as fewer services and programs are available statewide. As victims of domestic violence have already suffered from a substantial amount of unpredictability in regards to their safety, relationships, parenting abilities and health related factors, we strive to continue to offer predictable, consistent services that can be depended on by the population we serve.

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 Middlesex County 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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