

**Testimony for the Appropriations Hearing**  
**Advocacy Unit- Sexual Assault**

The Center for Family Justice, one of the nine community based member programs of the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence (formerly CONNSACS), has provided life-saving services to sexual and domestic violence 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, MDT services, and other services necessary to ensure victims of domestic and sexual violence are having their needs met.

The Advocacy Unit specifically assists victims and their children who are coping with sexual assault and its impact on the family system. It is through our program and the individual and group counseling they receive, case management, and ongoing support, that victims develop the tools necessary to cope with the trauma of sexual assault and become an empowered survivor.

Client “Mona” is a Portuguese-speaking woman of Brazilian decent. Being new to the country, Mona is still in the process of learning English, a barrier that she has found to significantly impede her ability to connect with her community and environment. Unfortunately, language and immigration status have not only affected Mona’s ability to connect with others; Mona has also experienced a horrific series of events where she was taken advantage of due to how vulnerable those barriers made her in a new country.

While driving home from work one night, Mona noticed a police officer behind her on the road. Not thinking much of it, Mona continued on and parked outside her building. The police car pulled in behind her. The officer walked up and knocked on her window, startling her. With her limited ability to comprehend and communicate English, Mona recalls being asked why she had not pulled over to which she attempted to communicate that his lights were never on. The officer then asked for her license and registration to which she admitted she did not have a license. Noticing her struggle with English, the officer then asked for her immigration papers. Being in the country legally, Mona handed him the paperwork. When Mona attempted to get the papers back from the officer, he held onto the papers, pointed at them, and then pointed at her building. After repeating this motion, Mona realized the officer was suggesting to get her paperwork back, he wanted to enter her home. Mona obliged and once in her home, the officer proceeded to pull her onto his lap. Mona made her discomfort known and managed to get herself to a separate chair across from him. The officer requested that she show him around her apartment to which Mona complied. The officer then requested she give him her phone number to which Mona also complied. In the days that followed, Mona began receiving text messages requesting nude pictures. For days, the officer sent Mona message after message, including repeated requests to see her again and when would she be home, becoming increasingly demanding. A few nights later, the officer stated he would wait outside her building for her to return home. Mona stayed out as late as she could and when she had nowhere to go but home, she returned to find him parked outside her building. When she got out of her car, he followed her into the building and into the apartment, where he proceeded to sexually assault her. Confused and feeling she had no recourse, Mona simply froze.

Mona has been involved with the Center for Family Justice’s advocacy services since September 2015. During this time, she has been referred to The Center’s civil legal coordinator who has been

able to connect her to a concerned, prominent attorney willing to follow up on her case through internal investigations at no cost. Mona has also received free and confidential counseling services with an individual advocate, whom she has developed a trusting rapport with. Prior to services, she expressed to her advocate that she struggles to allow herself to feel her emotions due to how she was raised. However, during sessions, Mona has experienced moments of allowing herself to feel pain, frustration, and disappointment, all while being supported emotionally by an advocate in her native language. Through counseling services, Mona has also made tremendous progress towards refocusing her coping skills/techniques in a healthy direction.

Mona is now in school, learning English, all the while retaining employment, selling and obtaining a new car and moving to a new home (as she felt unsafe knowing her perpetrator knew her prior car and address). Mona's conviction to seeking justice and wellness for herself through all of her pain and isolation is an inspiration to all and her advocate is honored to remind her of that fact. Never once did Mona question whether holding the officer accountable for his actions by filing charges through internal investigation was the right thing to do. With The Center for Family Justice's advocacy services and referred legal assistance, Mona now has a support team behind her, advocating for her case to be heard. Mona's English has recently progressed to the level where she and her advocate meet in English without the assistance of a translator per Mona's request. Mona has told her advocate on many occasions that, especially during the time where she was unable to communicate in English, her advocate at the Center for Family Justice was her only safe and comforting outlet to discuss the assault, release her pain, and feel heard by anyone. She reports that the attorney she obtained through The Center for Family Justice's civil legal coordinator has exceeded her expectation, receiving prompt feedback from the investigation, informing her of the proceedings just as promptly, and placing high importance on her comprehension and experience. At her most recent session with her advocate, Mona described her disbelief that, with all that she has experienced, why such a successful attorney would agree to help her at no cost. Her advocate reminded her that wherever she goes, there are people who want to help. The Center for Family Justice is the home of those helpers for the residents of Eastern Fairfield County's six cities and towns; the only one for survivors of sexual violence.

This testimonial is one of many that highlights the importance of these services for victims of sexual assault. Rape crisis services are the only programs in our state that specialize in the counseling and advocacy needs of sexual assault survivors. In addition to Advocacy and Counseling Services, our program staffs free and confidential 24/7 hotlines in English and Spanish. We also provide accompaniment and support for victims at the hospital, police stations and courts on a regular basis, and remain available on call to assist victims of assault throughout their journey along their own path to healing. Funding for rape crisis programs in the Department of Public Health budget is essential for community based sexual assault crisis programs to provide crisis intervention and advocacy services to thousands of child adolescent and adult victims of sexual violence.

We oppose the governor's proposal for a 5.75 cut and the consolidation of funding for sexual assault victims into a general fund. It is unclear how the 5.75 cut will be allocated and therefore, total elimination of our funding is a real threat. A proposed cut at any level is contrary to our state's commitment to address sexual violence. With so much attention being drawn to campus sexual violence, sexual assault in the military and new federal and state laws encouraging collaboration have victims step forward, now is not the time to cut direct support to the victims and survivors of sexual violence who need our help and support to seek care and justice. Please oppose the Governor's proposed budget and restore the rape crisis line item at full funding.

Sincerely,

Marisa Garwacki  
Coordinator of Advocacy & Empowerment Services  
The Center for Family Justice  
753 Fairfield Avenue  
Bridgeport, CT, 06604  
(203)-334-6154 ext. 116  
[mgarwacki@centerforfamilyjustice.org](mailto:mgarwacki@centerforfamilyjustice.org)