Testimony Regarding

HB 5044, AA Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2017

Appropriations Committee

February 11, 2016

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Flexor, Representative Abercrombie, Representative McCarthy Vahey, Representative McGorty, Representative Rosario and members of the committee. The Center for Family Justice provided life-saving services to over 8,567 people in FY 2015. We provide Domestic Violence Advocacy, Sexual Violence Advocacy, Multidisciplinary Investigative Team services for children who disclose sexual or physical abuse, Legal Services, Criminal Court Advocacy, Civil Court Advocacy, and Community Education and Prevention. We serve victims and their children in the towns of Bridgeport, Fairfield, Easton, Stratford, Trumbull, and Monroe.

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 oppose the proposed block grant system for human services, including domestic violence services, and ask that you please consider its impact on an already fragile system and our ability to ever effect the change to the funding stream for their services.

Impact of reduced advocacy services on civil legal services program

One of the greatest barriers for a victim of intimate partner violence in leaving an abusive relationship is access to affordable legal services. In many instances, the abuser controls the finances, leaving the victim without the resources to hire an attorney. Civil Legal Services is one of the many crisis intervention services that the clients can access with the help of their advocate. When a victim arrives at The Center for Family Justice for the first time, it is their advocate who helps them understand all of the services available to them. Without that first line of defense, victims are unaware of what services exist and how they can avail themselves of these services. Reduced funding would reduce the number of advocates available to provide life-saving services to victims of abuse. Advocates are our front line. They are meeting with victims at the height of a crisis and helping them access services that will provide immediate crisis intervention and help them on the path toward survivorship.

I would like to share with you an actual example of how essential Advocacy Services are to victims of intimate partner violence. A woman came to The Center for Family Justice as a walk in. She finally found the courage to tell someone about her life. The client has been married for 15 years, but she and her husband have been together a total of 31 years. They have a 12 year old son. The client's husband does not permit her to work, does not permit her to use the phone or computer without his knowledge, does not permit her to have friends, and, the final insult, brought home is girl friend to live and sleep with him in their home – 11 years ago – and his wife gets to sleep on the couch. Her husband has gone so far as to remove all the phones from the home, or in some instances, tap the telephones. His goal is to completely isolate and humiliate his wife and his 12 year old son is there to bear witness. When the client told her husband she could no longer live like this he threatened her life and threatened to kill himself. He threw violent tantrums. The client was literally at the end of her rope and no longer knew how, without any resources available to her, she was going to find a way out.

When the client arrived at The Center for Family Justice she was assigned an advocate and it changed her life forever. Not only did she receive advice on safety planning and counseling, but she learned of the civil legal program. Through the advocate referral process, the client was put in touch with the proper channels and now has an attorney working with her, pro bono, to facilitate her divorce and custody action. The client called me the other day to tell me how happy she is, how having the attorney has relieved her of the heavy stress she had been feeling, and how she and her son are now receiving the counseling they both desperately need. She knows they have a long road ahead, but now she can see a brighter future. Without the help of her domestic violence advocate, the client would still be living in fear with no hope.

It is my hope that the distinguished members of this committee will take this testimony into account and not create any cuts that would diminish the number of advocates providing these essential life-saving services.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

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