

**CONNECTICUT ALLIANCE
TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE**



Support. Advocate. Prevent.

**Testimony of Laura Cordes, Executive Director
Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence**

**S.B. 17 AN ACT PROMOTING FAIRNESS IN ACCESS TO INFORMATION, SUPPORT AND
JUSTICE FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS (Support)**

HB. 5222 AN ACT CONCERNING ACCESS TO INFORMATION FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS (Oppose)

Public Safety and Security Committee

Tuesday, February 27, 2018

Good afternoon, Senator Larson, Senator Guglielmo, Representative Verrengia and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee. My name is Laura Cordes, and I am the Executive Director of Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence (formerly CONNSACS). For over 35 years The Alliance has been the state's leading voice to end sexual violence and the statewide coalition of community-based sexual assault crisis services programs whose mission is to end sexual violence and ensure high quality, comprehensive and culturally-competent sexual assault victim services.

I also serve as Chair of the Governor's Sexual Assault Kit Working Group (SAKWG) and am a longstanding member of the Commission on the Standardization of the Collection of Evidence in Sexual Assault Investigations (Evidence Commission).

On behalf of our member programs and the victims and survivors we serve, I want to thank you for the opportunity to come before you in support of the S.B 17 *AN ACT PROMOTING FAIRNESS IN ACCESS TO INFORMATION, SUPPORT AND JUSTICE FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS*

Rape remains the most underreported crime in our country. In our state, according to Uniform Crime Report reports, rape is the only violent crime that has not significantly decreased.

As the millions of #MeToo stories have illustrated, victims of rape and sexual assault face significant barriers to disclosing or reporting an assault. Many fear they will not be believed and experience undue shame, blame and guilt as well as threats from the offender or the offender's friends and family. So when a survivor braves coming forward in the aftermath of a significant trauma to undergo an invasive sexual assault forensic exam, we need to be there for them, with non judgmental and

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This bill will also requires health care facilities which conduct forensic sexual assault exams to contact a sexual assault victim advocate upon the arrival of a victim of sexual assault at their facility. Utilizing a sexual assault counselor, also known as a sexual assault victim advocate for victims of rape and sexual assault who seek care and treatment following an assault, has been a longstanding best practice in our state, outlined in the protocol referenced in 19a-112a as the *State of Connecticut Technical Guidelines for Health Care Response to Victims of Sexual Assault*, and supported by numerous national organizations including most recently, the National Institute of Justice, as noted in their 2017 report, *National Best Practice for Sexual Assault Kits: A Multidisciplinary Approach*.

Certified sexual assault victim advocates at our member centers respond to hospital calls at all hours of the day and night, wait with victims sometimes for several hours until an exam can begin, and then through the invasive and arduous exam which can take an additional 4-6 hours. Their role is to provide confidential counseling and support, information and options, and to serve as a bridge to additional community services and support through the criminal justice process.

Client feedback surveys over the course of the last 3 years show that victims and survivors who have been supported by sexual assault victim advocates in a hospital setting overwhelmingly report that they felt supported and received the information they needed from the sexual assault victim advocate who worked with them.

After well over two decades of working in ERs and responding to calls, we know that health care providers value advocates, but due to staff turnover and lack of consistent training on the Technical Guidelines created under this statute, the utilization of sexual assault advocates remains inconsistent.

Sexual assault victim advocates are most frequently utilized by ER departments that are part of the part of the Judicial Branch, Office of Victim Services, Gail Burns-Smith Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner program (GBS SAFE Program). Within this program, once the SAFE is activated by the hospital, an advocate is called by the SAFE and they respond in tandem to the facility. Unfortunately due to budget deficits, the program will not, at least in the near future, be able to expand statewide as originally anticipated.

A recent and welcome change in state law now allows for the GBS SAFE Program to provide training to ER departments that are not part of the SAFE program. It is our hope that with additional training and this new requirement in SB 17, that advocates will be called for *every* survivor who presents for a sexual assault forensic exam.

Lastly, SB 17 calls upon the members of the Evidence Commission to do the important work of developing policies and procedures to ensure that victims have access to information regarding their SAK, including when it is tested, whether DNA from the SAK was entered into a state or federal DNA data bank, and whether the sample matches a profile in such a DNA data bank.