

**Testimony of Cynthia Dugan, Sexual Assault Victim Advocate
Rape Crisis Center of Milford**

**In support of S.B. No. 17 – An Act Promoting Fairness In Access To Information, Support And
Justice For Sexual Assault Victims**

**Public Safety and Security Committee
February 27, 2018**

Good afternoon Senator Larson, Senator Guglielmo, Representative Verrengia and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee. My name is Cynthia Dugan. I am a sexual assault victim advocate for the Rape Crisis Center of Milford. The Rape Crisis Center of Milford, established in 1974 is one of nine community based sexual assault crisis programs that are members of the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence. We serve the communities of Ansonia, Derby, Milford, Orange, Seymour, Shelton, and West Haven, including the University of New Haven campus.

The services of a sexual assault crisis center include but are not limited to 24/7 crisis intervention and support through our confidential crisis hotline, accompaniment to hospitals for the collection of evidence, accompaniment to police departments when a statement is taken, support through the criminal court process and beyond. Our services are unique in that we will stay involved offering support to victims and families from disclosure through disposition. These services are all free of charge to the clients we serve.

When a victim of sexual assault makes the very difficult decision to seek medical attention and ultimately have the evidence collection kit completed chances are that they have spent much time going over the sexual assault in their minds, questioning why and how this could have happened to them. Consequently, victims have many fears and concerns including, will I be believed, will my friends and family support, and what happens next. Additional questions arise concerning how will I pay for this examination? Will I need a lawyer if I report to police? Will I have to testify in court? These questions and many more thoughts and concerns weigh heavy on a victim and can inhibit their ability to work through the trauma immediately following an assault. I once worked with a victim who stated to me when I responded to the hospital that she had been driving around the emergency department for four hours before she was able to access medical services. In this particular case the hospital staff called our office immediately and I was able to stay with that victim through the medical process and continue to offer support as the case moved forward through the legal process to a successful prosecution. In cases where a victim advocate is not called often times we receive calls from victims in the days and weeks that follow the assault and the victim is angry, confused, and frustrated by the fact that they have not heard anything about the kit results, or word from the investigating officer regarding their case if in fact they did decide to report which is much more unlikely without the support of a victim advocate.

I have been an advocate for our center for over twenty years and during that time our staff has worked diligently to collaborate with the medical professionals in the emergency departments of the hospitals in our service area. We do this by offering and providing training to their staff about the services our center with an emphasis on how crucial it is to call an advocate as soon as a victim presents at the hospital. My experience has shown that when we can achieve this goal it has a significant positive

impact for victims. Reducing the level of confusion about the evidence collection process, reducing their level of anxiety and fear moving forward and empowering them to make informed decisions regarding whether or not to report to law enforcement and offering continued services and counseling to them and their family members reduces the impact of the trauma they have experienced and helps them to successfully move forward with their lives. Unfortunately, due to staff changes, confusion about when to call an advocate, or not being aware of the services of the sexual assault center in their area, this immediate response is inconsistent and victims are not receiving the support services they need.

Connecticut has already established itself as a leader in coordinating a multidisciplinary response in the collection of evidence through the development of evidence collection guidelines, the implementation of the Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner program, and the clear time frames for the transfer and testing of these kits. Testing sexual assault evidence kits and developing policies and procedures to ensure that victims have access to information regarding their kit is an appropriate response for every sexual assault victim who has found the courage to come forward and have that evidence collected. Requiring hospitals to contact a sexual assault victim advocate upon the victim's arrival at the hospital is also imperative and my experience tells me that it is critical to the victim's emotional health and wellbeing going forward. This legislation will ensure that the work done to develop and implement best practices in Connecticut hospitals will provide a safe and supportive haven for victims of sexual assault during the first critical 120 hours after such a traumatic event.

On behalf of my co-workers and the victims & survivors we serve I want to thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to speak with you today in support of this bill.

Thank You,

Cynthia Dugan
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