

Testimony of Joanna Flanagan, Campus Advocate/Prevention Educator
YWCA New Britain Sexual Assault Crisis Service
**In Support of Senate Bill No. 17 – An Act Promoting Fairness in Access to Information,
Support and Justice for Sexual Assault Victims**

Public Safety and Security Committee
Tuesday, February 27, 2018

To the members of the Committee on Public Safety and Security, my name is Joanna Flanagan and I am the Campus Advocate/Prevention Educator for the Sexual Assault Crisis Service, a program of the YWCA New Britain and a member of the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence, formerly known as CONNSACS. SACS provides crisis counseling, advocacy, and support to people affected by sexual violence throughout all of Hartford County, plus parts of Tolland County and the town of Plymouth. Within my role at the organization, I provide prevention education to people of all ages in addition to providing support and advocacy to victims/survivors of sexual violence through our 24-hour crisis hotline. Often, my first contact with a survivor is at the hospital as they are undergoing a forensic exam and sexual assault evidence collection kit. With this experience, I would like to write in support of SB-17, An Act Promoting Fairness in Access to Information, Support and Justice for Sexual Assault Victims.

A sexual assault kit is collected in the immediate aftermath of a sexual assault. An individual has only 120 hours after an assault to go to a local emergency room and have a kit done. As I'm sure you can imagine, this is a time when victims/survivors are feeling a wide range of emotions and may be frightened and uncertain, as well as mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. On top of all of this, they are going through a lengthy, confusing, and invasive procedure to gather what they hope is enough evidence for some justice to be served. The role of an advocate in this setting is to simply be there for that person and to support them in whatever way they need. Sometimes, this means holding someone's hand and passing them tissues while their body is combed for evidence. Other times, it means talking with them about any subject they can think of besides what they are going through, because distraction is what they need to cope in that moment. No matter what, an advocate is there to provide compassion, support, and information to someone in their time of need.

In my time with the Sexual Assault Crisis Service, I have responded to numerous hospital accompaniments at any of the eleven hospitals in our service area. When I respond, I see myself as part of a team with the primary goal of ensuring that the victim/survivor is cared for and treated with respect. Advocates work in tandem with nurses and hospital staff. While the nurse collecting the kit has to focus on accurately collecting and storing evidence in addition to assessing a patient's health, advocates are able to focus on the patient's mental health and well-being. Sometimes, the process will move too quickly and a patient will become overwhelmed or confused and will shut down. At this time, I am able to step in and ask for a break while talking with the patient and providing comfort. When a victim/survivor feels supported and listened to, the evidence collection process goes much more smoothly. This is why I support SB-17, especially the provision that requires hospitals contact a sexual assault victim advocate upon a victim/survivor's arrival at the hospital. The sooner an advocate can be there, the better the outcome for that victim/survivor.

I have had experiences where I have arrived at the hospital as the kit was being started and the victim/survivor shares that they had been in the room alone for over an hour. In situations like this, it would have made a huge difference to that person if I had been called as soon as they arrived, because then I would have been there to talk with them and offer support while they waited for the kit to start. Sexual violence is an act that can make people feel isolated and alone, and wherever it is possible to remind someone that there are people who will listen and support them, we should

do so. By having a hospital contact an advocate right away, that victim/survivor gets the message that they are supported, valued, and that they are not alone.

In addition to the provision requiring that a hospital contacts an advocate, SB-17 would also improve the tracking of evidence collection kits and make it easier for victims/survivors to access information about their kit. Currently, the process for survivors to access this information is extremely unclear. A common question I am asked while sitting with someone in the hospital is, "what happens next?" At this time, I am not able to give a definite answer to that question. I can tell them the kit will go to the police and the lab and I can make sure they have the detective's phone number, but I cannot offer anything beyond that. Often, victims/survivors feel re-victimized when they feel they are being denied information about their kit and what has happened to it. Having a system in place for someone to track their kit and learn of any updates would be instrumental in empowering victims/survivors with information about their case and would prevent that feeling of re-victimization that comes when survivors feel shut out of their investigation.

Connecticut has already set itself apart as a leader in many areas related to sexual assault evidence collection kits. SB-17 would only improve on our state's efforts to support survivors of sexual violence and bring offenders to justice and that is why I urge the committee to support this important legislation.

Thank you for your consideration.

for every woman