

Dear Senator Larson, Senator Guglielmo, Representative Verrengia and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee.

I am a Community Educator with Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury, one of nine member centers of the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Assault. Our agency provides various services to victims and survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury serves the towns of Beacon Falls, Bethlehem, Middlebury, Naugatuck, Oxford, Prospect, Southbury, Thomaston, Watertown, Waterbury, Wolcott and Woodbury.

I am writing in support of Bill SB 17: An Act Promoting Fairness in Access to Information, Support and Justice for Sexual Assault Victims.

One of the most important factors in supporting victims of sexual assault is informing the victim of the many different options available to them through health care, the criminal justice system, legal protection, victim compensation and various other avenues, in order to reclaim control over their lives. Victim Advocates meeting victims at a medical facility after a sexual assault has occurred have a unique opportunity to provide empathetic, non-judgmental support for victims during a traumatic, painful and frightening time. Victim Advocates are well versed in the many different options available to victims after a crime occurs, and are available to present these options to victims, for the victims to ultimately decide what the best course of action is for them. Empowering victims to reclaim autonomy and choice is essential for victims to heal following a sexual assault.

Prior to my employment with Safe Haven, throughout college, I volunteer as a Victim's Advocate with Milford Rape Crisis Center, as well as Our Voice Rape Crisis Center in Asheville, North Carolina. Of all the victims I met with at the hospital, none knew what to expect from a sexual assault forensic exam, what their rights were in regards to evidence collection and pressing charges, or what service options were available to them through the rape crisis center and Office of Victims Services. Each victim I worked with expressed sincere gratitude for the information and resources I was able to provide as a Victim's Advocate during their time in the hospital, and were able to reach out to staff at the rape crisis center for further care and services after being discharged.

Additionally, it is important that a clear process be instated for notifying victims about their case and when their kit is tested. Knowing the status of the case and kit testing allows victims to make decisions regarding their case based on the most up to date information. Under the current system, victims may feel frustrated, discouraged and re-victimized when they reach multiple "dead-ends" in attempting to retrieve information regarding their kits. The system proposed under SB 17 would ensure that victims know the appropriate agencies to contact and give them a timeline for when they can expect to receive information.

As the millions of #MeToo stories have illustrated, victims of rape 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 offenders friends and family. Survivors who brave coming forward in the aftermath of a significant trauma to undergo an invasive exam, deserve to have non judgmental and compassionate support, an assurance that their kit will be tested and access to information about their case and the results of the testing.

Providing this is a simple matter of justice for sexual assault victims and a matter of public safety.

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 state Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner program, as well as clear timeframes for the transfer and testing of all kits. We were the first state in the country to voluntarily survey all law enforcement agencies to identify previously untested sexual assault kits, and have secured federal grants to test them. We must take these next steps to ensure that we are doing everything we can to support survivors and apprehend offenders.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sarah Holmes