



**Testimony of Ann Rodwell-Lawton, Director of Education, Training, and Outreach
Women's Center of Greater Danbury
In Support of S.B. 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**

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

My name is Ann Rodwell-Lawton and I the Director of Education, Training, and Outreach at the Women's Center of Greater Danbury. The Women's Center is the sole provider of services to victims of sexual assault in upper Fairfield and lower Litchfield county areas. In fiscal year 2017, the Women's Center provided life-changing services to over 33,000 individuals in our 13-town service area. We are one of the nine community-based member centers of the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence. All services provided are free, confidential, trauma-informed, and victim-centered. These services include individual counseling, safety planning, court advocacy, hospital advocacy, support groups, crisis intervention through two 24-hour hotlines, and educational and primary prevention programs. We serve victims in 13 towns in the Greater Danbury area including Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Danbury, Kent, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Redding, Ridgefield, Roxbury, Sherman, and Washington.

I urge you to support S.B. 17. This bill will ensure that victims are notified about their case and the status of their sexual assault evidence kit, and ultimately create clear processes for victims. Additionally, it will ensure that victims are connected with their local sexual assault victim advocates while at a healthcare facility. This bill will allow us to strengthen the state's systematic response to victims and continue to implement best practices.

It is crucial that sexual assault victim advocates are contacted once a victim arrives at a healthcare facility so that advocates can arrive to the facility in a timely manner. In Connecticut, all sexual assault victim advocates have undergone a 40-hour certification process. This certification course emphasizes how to understand trauma and provide trauma-informed care. Understanding the experiences of victims and the impact of trauma is our specialty. When we are present at a healthcare facility, we are able to assist the medical staff so they can focus on their role and expertise of providing medical care. Many of the nurses at our local hospitals have explained how reassuring it is to have victim advocates present during an evidence collection kit, as it allows them to focus on their medical care, while the advocate can focus on the victim's needs. Whether the victim just needs a hand to hold, or someone to grab them some water, the advocate is there to meet their needs. When victim advocates are present at healthcare facilities, it makes nurses lives easier and allows for a more coordinated, comprehensive response.

Victim advocates are called to hospitals on a regular basis to advocate for victims during evidence collection kits. Our advocates are up to date on the latest policies and best practices with the evidence collection kits, and can provide guidance to nurses who do not administrator the evidence collection kits on a regular basis. For example, there is a common misconception that every step of the kit needs to be completed, or else the evidence is invalid. However, not every step of has to be completed, and victims



can opt out of steps that make them uncomfortable. Recently, one of our advocates was able to explain this to a victim, and the victim did opt out of two of the steps. Implementing those steps would have been a triggering, re-traumatizing experience, and the victim was thankful that these options were clearly explained to her.

Many of the victims we work with have expressed frustration and anxiety over the lack of communication about the status of their kit. Currently, victims have to be assertive and follow through on contacting the appropriate agencies to see whether their kit was tested, and whether it matched a profile in such a DNA data bank. Victims feel burdened with the responsibility of having to do this follow up and consistently communicate about the next steps and status of their kit. Victims feel like they have to “jump through hoops” to get answers. This bill would improve victim’s access to information about their kits and their case by developing clear and consistent policies and procedures.

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 nonjudgmental 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. Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions.

Sincerely,

Ann Rodwell-Lawton, M.S.W.

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