

Dear Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Judiciary:

I am writing in SUPPORT of SB 442, AN ACT CONCERNING COURT PROCEEDINGS INVOLVING ALLEGATIONS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE AND DOMESTIC ABUSE. This Bill was written with input from survivors, advocates and legal experts around the country to enhance court protections for victims of family violence and domestic abuse and address problem areas within our court system. This Bill is long overdue.

Domestic violence has a lengthy losing history in divorce courts. Studies show that courts are dubious of such accusations. Part of the problem is that domestic violence is only viewed in terms of violence and does not include coercive/psychological abuse. SB 442 is named Jennifer's Law after the Jennifer Dulos case, one that evolved into multiple tragedies, leaving the children without parents and undoubtedly scarred for life.

This Bill takes the much-needed step to end this abuse of defendants in court. Our outdated definition of domestic violence needs to be changed to fully incorporate coercive behavior. In the Dulos case, Jennifer repeatedly testified about coercive threats, but the judge denied her request for emergency child custody citing lack of evidence. CT statutes should recognize the reality of domestic violence beyond its current limited legal definition. Courts should err on the side of believing victims and protecting the safety of their children. As evidenced by the Dulos case, this is seriously a life and death issue.

While not being able to speak from personal experience, I can speak from going through a divorce/custody case with a close friend who was a victim of severe emotional abuse. She lived in fear for her safety and fear of emotional trauma to her children and went through a lengthy court battle to escape her abuse and protect her children. Fortunately, her case ended with a positive resolution, but I lived through needless trauma with her and never want to see another individual go through this stress and torment. To be abused by a spouse and then again by the courts can be catastrophic and should be prevented with adequate laws on the books to protect them.

There are so many long-needed provisions in SB 442 to protect the abused, such as making domestic violence the first factor assessed by the court in determining the best interests of the children and judicial education programs. I am happy to lend my strong support to SB 442. Hopefully, with passage of this Bill abuse victims will finally obtain protection for them and their children.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sherry Wernicke
8 Willowmere Avenue
Riverside, CT 06878