

Testimony Submitted on behalf of State Representative Kavros DeGraw, State Representative Farrar, and State Representative Gilchrest

Public Safety and Security Committee

Thursday, March 7, 2024

Chairmen Gaston and Boyd, Rankings Ciccarella and Howard, vice chairs and members of the Public Safety Committee:

In 2017, as I prepared to run for office, I was made aware of a situation in Canton, where a young woman, who you will hear from later today, came to the Canton Police Department to file a report of sexual assault as a victim and was quickly turned into a suspect during the investigative process.

She was accused of filing a false police report and it eventually came to light that the officers in this case were not only incorrect in this accusation but also did not properly investigate the sexual assault or respond appropriate to the survivor. While the case was eventually settled in court in favor of the survivor, it does not erase the trauma the survivors experienced.

Last year, filmmaker Rachel deLeon, reached out to me, Representative Farrar, and Representative Gilchrest, among others, to direct us to her recent Netflix documentary, Victim/Suspect. The survivor from Canton was featured in this film, as well as another high-profile case from Bridgeport and hundreds of others across the US. As the documentary demonstrates, women who turned to the criminal justice system to report a crime are instead treated as suspects for false reporting. In many of these cases, victims' names, pictures and the details of their assaults were turned into salacious stories by news media compounding the trauma they experienced. It's one of the few, if not, the only situation where an accusation of false report ends in such an extreme response. Sadly, one of the women highlighted in the documentary took her own life over the stress of being turned into a suspect but all of the survivors shared the negative and long-term impacts of being treated as suspects rather than victims.

Last fall, the Bipartisan Women's Caucus partnered with the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence to hold a screening of the Victim/Suspect documentary followed by a panel directly after that included legislators, law enforcement, advocates and survivors. One of the ideas that came out of that screening is what you see before you in HB 5399, the need to establish a model policy around the criminal justice response to sexual assault. We have worked with law enforcement to ensure that the policy makes sense to them in terms of how they do their very difficult jobs. This isn't just a bill that victims and survivors want, it's a bill that law enforcement also wants and needs in order to serve the public to the very best of their ability.

We ask that you support HB5399 so that we can do more to make victims in Connecticut feel safe and to give law enforcement the additional tools they need when they are interacting with sexual assault survivors.