

### **Public Safety and Security Committee**

Public Testimony of the CT Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

S.B. 17: *An Act Promoting Fairness in Access to Information, Support and Justice for Sexual Assault Victims*

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To the Members of the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Security:

My name is Liz Halla-Mattingly. I am a graduate student at the UConn School of Social Work and currently a Master of Social Work (MSW) intern with the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF). CWEALF is a statewide nonprofit organization that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized.

CWEALF urges the Committee to support S.B. 17: An Act Promoting Fairness in Access to Information, Support and Justice for Sexual Assault Victims, which will codify into state law the important work of the Governor's Sexual Assault Kit Working Group and the Commission on the Standardization of the Collection of Evidence's to develop and implement best practices.

We especially support S.B. 17's proposal to require health care facilities to contact a sexual assault victim advocate upon the arrival of a victim of sexual assault to their facility, a longstanding and nationally recognized best practice. This change in statute will help more survivors access the help and support they deserve.

In addition to my role as a student and intern, I am a certified sexual assault crisis counselor and currently work as the Volunteer Program Manager for the Sexual Assault Crisis Service of the YWCA New Britain. In the eight years as a counselor I have sat through numerous forensic evidence collection exams with survivors of sexual violence at each of the eleven hospitals that the YWCA SACS serves. Not many people have had the privilege of seeing this process first hand and I want to share what I have learned.

When a victim/survivor of rape or sexual assault enters an emergency department they often have no idea what will happen or how long they will be there. Although they may be triaged and placed in a private room, they are usually left to wait alone before they are seen by a nurse to start the exam. Emergency departments are often hectic and unpredictable, and this waiting time is different for each patient. Once the exam begins, patients are often shocked to learn the exam will last a couple of hours on top of the time they were waiting. If the patient agrees to continue with the exam, it is only then that the nurse informs the patient that they have the right to a sexual assault counselor. Right now a patient has to ask for a counselor to be contacted, an unnecessary burden that is placed on the victim/survivor.

With SB17, the change would make sure that a sexual assault counselor is called immediately when the patient first discloses why they are there. While the patient is waiting to start the exam, the counselor can drive to the hospital. When the nurse reviews the consent form, the counselor is either in the room and ready to provide their services, or the nurse informs the patient that a counselor is arriving shortly. In this scenario, **there is no responsibility placed on the patient to**

**ensure they have access to this right** because the hospital has already contacted a sexual assault counselor.

The difference between these two scenarios may seem miniscule but the impact on the victim/survivor is immense. If a patient needs to wait until the nurse visits their exam room, the patient may need to complete the exam on their own without the support they may need.

Access to a sexual assault counselor who can provide support, compassion, and information is crucial for many patients. Sexual assault counselors help patients feel supported during an invasive and intimate exam and help connect patients to additional resources once the exam is over.

In addition to making sure every victim/survivor entering a health care facility has access to a sexual assault counselor, the proposed legislation will improve the tracking of kits and make information more accessible for victims/survivors who inquire whether or not their kit was tested. This is also a best practice. In 2016, research by the Joyful Heart Foundation found that victim access to information about the status of their cases can promote healing for survivors of sexual assault.

Senate Bill No. 17 is common sense legislation that promotes public safety and access to healing and justice for victims/survivors of sexual assault. We urge Connecticut lawmakers to support this bill to ensure that victims/survivors of sexual assault receive the information and support they deserve.