

## **Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee**

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

H.B. 6374: *Act Concerning Sexual Misconduct On College Campuses*

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-seven years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate for policies that advance the economic security of women and promote gender equity.

We urge the committee to support H.B. 6374: *An Act Concerning Sexual Misconduct on College Campuses* to protect students who report being a victim or witness of sexual assault, stalking or violence from disciplinary action by an institution of higher education, and establish a Council on Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey to approve sexual misconduct climate surveys for use by institutions of higher education in the state.

The involvement of drugs and alcohol in instances of campus sexual violence is extremely prevalent. Survivors are often fearful to report their assault and disclose the involvement of drugs and/or alcohol because of the potential of facing punitive actions for breaking the school's code of conduct. While students might omit their use of drugs and/or alcohol in their report out of fear of being penalized, their incapacitation could be the key factor in their school determining they were the victim of a sexual assault, which can then result in true justice.

Thirty-eight (38%) of victims of sexual assault experience work and/or school problems, such as decreased motivation, lower academic performance, and missing school or work due to mental health challenges.<sup>1</sup> If colleges and universities in Connecticut continue to have the power to take actions against students for their use of drugs or alcohol, survivors will no longer receive the support and healthcare they deserve. Punitive actions taken by the school will only further disrupt the education of the 38% of survivors already experiencing school and work problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Socio-emotional Impact of Violent Crime* (2014).

According to 2018 data from the University of Connecticut, 0.5% of the undergraduate population reported a sexual assault;<sup>2</sup> however, in the 2015 Campus Climate Survey, 6.5% of survey respondents reported having experienced attempted or successful sexual assault while at UConn.<sup>3</sup> While we cannot conclude that circumstances at UConn improved thirteen times over in a matter of just three years, we can attribute this difference to the means of reporting. The Campus Climate Survey allowed for students to anonymously report their sexual assault and shows a huge gap in reporting to the school.

By establishing a Council on Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey to approve sexual misconduct climate surveys for use by institutions of higher education in the state, as outlined in this bill, anonymous reporting is more accessible and will better gauge the **actual** statistics of sexual violence at our state's colleges and universities.

Every survivor of sexual violence should be informed and feel supported in reporting their assault to their school. Until that goal is realized, we must remove barriers to reporting by instituting an amnesty policy against drugs and alcohol and establishing a Council on Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey.

Therefore, lawmakers must pass H.B. 6374. We urge the Committee and Connecticut lawmakers to advance this important legislation this year.

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<sup>2</sup> *University of Connecticut 2017 Report Pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes Section 10a-55m* (Rep.). (2018). <https://titleix.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1417/2018/09/2017-10a-55m-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *2015 HEDS Sexual Assault Campus Climate Survey University of Connecticut Frequency Report* (Rep.). (2018). <https://titleix.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1417/2016/04/UConn-Campus-Climate-Survey-Report.pdf>