

CONNECTICUT ALLIANCE TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE



Support. Advocate. Prevent.

**Testimony of Laura Cordes, Executive Director
Connecticut Sentencing Commission Public Hearing
December 6, 2018**

Good morning Judge Devlin, and members of the Sentencing Commission. My name is Laura Cordes, and I am the Executive Director of Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence (formerly CONNSACS) the statewide coalition of nine community-based sexual assault crisis services centers whose mission is to create communities free of sexual violence and to provide culturally affirming, trauma-informed advocacy, prevention, and intervention services centered on the voices of survivors. Last year certified sexual assault crisis counselors and victim advocates at our centers and within the state's sex offender management and supervision probation and parole units, served over 8,100 child, adolescent and adult survivors and provided prevention education and training programs to over 50,000 residents.

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you to address the proposed recommendations on the registry, management, and sentencing of sex offenders as outlined in Appendix A of the Notice of Public Hearing.

Convened in 2015 by the General Assembly to investigate Connecticut's current system of assessment, management, treatment, and sentencing of sex offenders, the Sentencing Commission's Special Committee on Sex Offenders met over the course of two and a half years, and made numerous recommendations which were adopted by the Commission and outlined in the report, "A Study of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Registration, and Management System."

I served as a member of the Special Committee and the co-chair of one of the three subcommittees, the Subcommittee on Community and Victim Needs. Throughout the work of the subcommittee, victims and survivors of sexual violence expressed a dissatisfaction or frustration with the criminal justice system. While there were exceptions this was a continued theme found in presentations by victim advocates, during testimony at the January 2017 Sentencing Commission public hearing, and in responses to the Public Input Survey regarding the offender's sentence, access to information and support. As a result, in addition to the proposal to move to a risk and tiered based offender registry, the Sentencing Commission report contains many low and no-cost recommendations to increase trauma-informed responses and support for victims and survivors of sexual assault throughout the criminal justice system, and to promote education and information programs for community members regarding sexual violence prevention, and myths and facts related to individuals who perpetrate sexual assault crimes. Several of the recommendations found on pages 12-14 and 125 -129 of the report reflect the work of our subcommittee and should be held up and supported by the Sentencing Commission for legislative action as well.

One such recommendation is to require an annual report to the legislature detailing the number of sexual assault cases presented in Connecticut criminal courts; including initial charge, plea, conviction and sentence. This information is vital, if we are to truly understand how we are addressing sexual assault crimes within our criminal justice system.

Survivors and other members of the public also expressed varying views of the helpfulness and difficulties associated with the registry. A Public Input Survey conducted by the *Special Committee* showed that respondents had an interest in knowing more about the actual crime(s) committed by those on the registry, an understanding of the dangerousness of the offender or risk of reoffense, and a desire for information regarding perceived risk and the crime committed rather than just the reference to the state statute. Survey participants were opposed to or had concerns about the removal of offenders who are currently on the Registry but were mostly split on removing offenders entirely from the Registry or moving lower risk offenders to a private (law enforcement) registry.

In Connecticut, people who commit crimes of sexual violence and serve a period of probation or parole are managed through a collaborative model of specialized supervision and treatment which include probation officers, treatment providers, and a community-based sexual assault victim advocate. The 18 probation and 5 parole specialized units represent a unique and successful collaboration between the Court Support Services Division (CSSD) and the Department of Correction, sex offender treatment providers, and sexual assault victim advocates. Working together individual treatment and supervision plans and as well as conditions based on each individual offender's risk are established and maintained for each offender. This nationally recognized model has contributed to reducing the rate of recidivism among offenders in our state.

The Alliance Post Conviction Sexual Assault Victim Advocates who work on these units and serve victims and community members throughout our state know first hand the impact that sexual violence has on survivors and their families and the concerns and fears that survivors face when the person who has harmed them re-enters the community.

The changes proposed to the registry will focus resources and attention to the most high risk offenders while keeping intact the specialized probation and parole units that are largely responsible for the day to day treatment and supervision of offenders in the community. We support this proposal and want to highlight components of the proposal that are critical to The Alliance continued support. First, is that the proposal is prospective. Allowing offenders who are currently on the registry to be removed retroactively would be an intolerable injustice to survivors who believed at the time of sentencing that the sentence and the registry requirements were firm.

Secondly, the proposal justly includes provisions for victims to have, access to information about their offender on the law enforcement registry, notification for future victims of sexual violence whose offender may petition to be moved from the public to a law enforcement registry, as well as an opportunity to make a statement to a newly established Sexual Offender Registration Board authorized to determine whether an

offender who is required to register should be placed on the public registry or law enforcement registry board, and will consider an offender's request for removal.

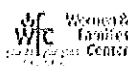
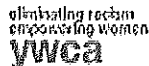
Who makes decisions about the risk of the offenders matters, and it is important that the board members have the expertise outlined in the 2017 *Study of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Registration, and Management System*. The eight members include: two people with substantial experience in providing sexual assault victims with victim advocacy services, three clinicians who meet the criteria for clinical membership in the Connecticut Association for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders (CATSO) or the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) and who have at least five years of experience in the assessment of sex offenders, and three persons with at least five years of experience in sex offender management and supervision who have received training in evidence-based supervision of sex offenders.

Lastly, should a bill move forward, we urge the Commission to propose language as recommended in the report, which would establish a multidisciplinary planning group including individuals who manage the current Registry, to help plan for the implementation changes in order to minimize the impact to victims and prepare victim advocates and those within the law enforcement community for the new protocols and registry changes.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please contact me with any questions you may have.

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Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence
Our Member Centers



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