



August 10, 2008

The Honorable Thomas P. Caltagirone, Chair
House Judiciary Committee
106 Irvis Office Building
P.O. Box 202127
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2127

RE: House Bill 59

Dear Chairman Caltagirone:

Twenty-five years ago, Schuylkill County residents formed what has become Schuylkill Women in Crisis (SWIC). In marking our milestone anniversary this year, SWIC is proud that our services and relationship with the community led to our recognition last year as one of the top three domestic violence programs in the nation. But as a founding member and as the executive director throughout most of SWIC's existence, I must express our utmost concern about the impact of long-term inadequate public funding on domestic violence services in Schuylkill County, and across the commonwealth.

Given the reality that one in three women will sooner or later be a victim of intimate partner violence, domestic violence programs today are not only an essential but also an integral component of the social welfare, legal, and health care systems. Yet in real dollars, public funding for domestic violence services has been cut while demands, and costs, for services have continued to expand. Since 2001, combined state and federal funding for domestic violence services has increased a TOTAL of just 1.45 percent. That is only about two-tenths of a percent annually, and is not even close to inflation over that period.

It is no exaggeration to call the situation today both grave and urgent. This committee needs to be conscious that as it meets, already poorly paid staffs are being cut to deal with escalating fuel, healthcare and other operating costs. Waiting lists for shelter and other services to victims and their children are routine and growing at SWIC and across the commonwealth. Our community education and children services will be eliminated if we do not find additional revenue by October 1. If funding is not increased, there is no doubt that in the very near future the courts, law enforcement and health care providers will be without services that they rely on us to provide both economically and effectively. The need for these services will not go away if we no longer provide them, of course. The issue will be whether they will be met at all for victims in Pennsylvania.

SWIC understands that domestic violence programs are not alone in facing funding cuts, although few if any others are expected to take injured and fearful families in with nothing more

than the clothes on the backs; feed, clothe, and shelter them; determine how serious their immediate risk of injury or death is; help them arrange to meet immediate healthcare, legal, housing and educational needs; keep them safe and hidden when needed, counsel them to heal and grow stronger – and do it all for free each year with diminishing resources.

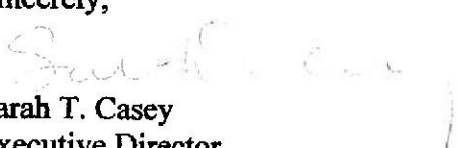
Domestic violence has long been recognized as a community problem that requires a community response. SWIC has done its part in Schuylkill County. We have been aggressive in cultivating community support and diversifying our funding base. Our community has contributed generously. We conduct an annual appeal, a 5K fun, a golf tournament, and recently opened a business – *The Grateful Thread* – to generate additional revenue. We are now conducting a \$2 million capital campaign to increase the capacity of our century old shelter because of the number of victims we must turn away. Community leaders contacted during the campaign are shocked to learn that the state does not even mandate services for victims of domestic violence. Staff members are routinely required to juggle tasks as incongruous as booking a foursome for a golf tournament while attempting to comfort a child just entering shelter after his mother was beaten. I know that staff worry when they place a woman's name on the waiting list whether they will read about her as a homicide victim in the next day's paper. This is our reality.

Now we are concerned by just-reported plans by the Department of Public Welfare to impose a new state funding formula emphasizing the size of a program's base population over the quality and quantity of services it provides and in disregard of competence and effectiveness to grow and stretch its funding. Should this formula be adopted for the 2009-2010 fiscal year, as proposed, alternatives for increasing state support for domestic violence services, particularly outside the metropolitan areas, will become even more imperative than they are today.

If the state is committed as it should be, as it must be for the safety of the victims, to a network of services through the commonwealth, House Bill 59 must be a priority and must be passed in what little remains of this legislative session. Failing to do so will tie our hands, and keep us from helping victims looking for shelter and services that families expect to be there for loved ones in danger.

Please accept this as my testimony in support for HB 59.

Sincerely,


Sarah T. Casey
Executive Director

cc: Honorable David Argall
Honorable Neal Goodman
Honorable Tim Seip