

## **Housing Committee**

Public Testimony of Connecticut Women's Education & Legal Fund (CWEALF)

*S.B. 294: An Act Concerning Housing Protections For Victims of Family Violence*

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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-eight years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate for policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity.

Through CWEALF's Legal Education Program, we provide information, education, referrals, and bilingual advocacy to the Connecticut community to ensure that all individuals in our state have access to legal justice, many times as victims/survivors of family violence. The majority of CWEALF's clients are low-income women with at least one dependent.

We urge the committee to support S.B. 294: *An Act Concerning Housing Protections For Victims of Family Violence*.

Family violence remains one of the leading causes of homelessness for women and children in Connecticut. Survivors of family violence are a special population of housing services and face many specific and challenging circumstances related to housing protections, housing stability and confidentiality. Finding and securing safe, affordable housing is an omnipresent barrier survivors face as a direct result of the actions of their abusers.

During the last legislative session, Connecticut broadened the definition of domestic violence through Public Act 21-78 to recognize the more pervasive and prevalent forms of abuse that include deprivation, financial, emotional and psychological tactics. Family violence often begins with perpetrators controlling the financial resources available to their victims as well as attempting to destroy their reputations, livelihoods and credibility. These tactics often leave victims under or unemployed, with damaged credit, or without the fiscal means to secure independent housing away from the perpetrator. Additionally, victims may face evictions as a result of the violent incidences and damages caused by their abusers.

Connecticut women and children that survive family violence are likely trapped in a cycle of housing instability perpetuated by the current lack of protections in place within state statutes. Another unique barrier to this issue is that many times landlords believe that they can ensure safety on their properties by keeping domestic survivors out.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, landlords will typically justify their actions to keep out or evict survivors by stating they have “zero tolerance” policies within lease contracts through the clauses regarding criminal activity occurring in the property.<sup>2</sup> These clauses are troublesome as they fail to account for which tenant was perpetrating the criminal activity.

Increased housing stability and protections are significant predictors of improving survivor’s quality of life post the traumatic experiences in a number of areas that include: increased safety, autonomy, decreased vulnerability to abuse, lowered levels of PTSD and depression, increased ability to sustained employment, and improved child outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

The current inflated Connecticut housing market, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, has made it even more difficult for survivors of family violence to access housing. Furthermore, it has made it even more of a challenge for survivors and their children to stay living in their homes so that they are provided some sense of normalcy by remaining close to their support systems, and able to attend the same schools. It remains a critical concern for survivors of family violence that Connecticut finds a way to keep them in the homes they are already occupying. Survivors should never have to face the uncertainty of where to live because of the actions of their abusers.

CWEALF urges the committee to support S.B. 294 as the bill reflects housing protections for survivors related to evictions, increases in rental payments, landlord refusals to renew lease agreements, and violations of contractual lease clauses because a crime was inflicted upon them and their children. We urge the committee to consider the suggested substitute bill language as submitted by the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) and consider the positive impact this legislation will have on the lives of survivors living within our state who are brave, resilient, accessing services to escape the risk of being homeless.

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1 <https://cceh.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/subsidizedhousingdv.pdf>

2 see note 1

3 <https://cceh.org/naeh-2016-serving-dv-survivors/>