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POLITICS

Enhancements to justice system recommended

By [unknown placeholder \$article.art_field1\$]

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Speaker of the House Christopher G. Donovan (D-Meriden) joined members of the Speaker's Task Force on Domestic Violence, led by State Representative Mae Flexer (D-Killingly, Plainfield, Sterling), recently to discuss the group's recommendations to the legislature.

"We made important progress in empowering victims, law enforcement personnel and service providers with groundbreaking legislation a year ago," said Donovan. "We still must do more to put a stop to these horrific crimes. I am encouraged that this task force is doing everything it can to prevent family violence and ensure that victims of domestic violence are receiving the help they need."

"We have looked at domestic violence from a variety of angles and today's recommendations show real breadth and depth," said Flexer. "With one in every four women experiencing domestic violence in their lifetime, we need to continue working together to improve both protection for victims and the overall prevention of domestic violence."

Chief among the group's recommendations is a series of changes to the judicial system, including reforming the bail bond process to improve the state's ability to regulate bail bond agents and professional bondsmen to stop the practice of "undercutting."

There have been a number of serious and fatal domestic violence incidents—including the tragic murder of Shengyl Rasim last year in West Haven—where the practice of bail bond undercutting played a role. In these instances, bail bond agents illegally discounted the premium due on the defendants' bonds and failed to charge for the amount they are statutorily required to charge. As a result, defendants post bond at rates lower than what the state requires and are released back into the community, sometimes without any "cooling off" period.

In 2010, Selami Ozdemir shot his wife, Shengyl Rasim, as she held her crying infant in her arms and their young son slept in the next room shortly after being released on bond following his second arrest for a domestic violence offense in a four month period. Ozdemir, despite having his bail set at \$25,000, was bailed out immediately by a bail bondsman without Ozdemir giving any monetary compensation to the bail bondsman.

"With about 30 percent of criminal court dockets involving domestic violence, reducing its incidence is an ongoing challenge," said State Representative Gerald Fox III (D-Stamford), who serves as House Chair of the legislature's Judiciary Committee and is a member of the Domestic Violence Task Force. "These recommendations build upon the great progress accomplished last year with a focus on both law enforcement and improving victim services."

The task force has also heard concerns about a lack of timely response from law enforcement to restraining order violations. To improve response time in these cases, the task force is proposing that a Statewide Law Enforcement Model Policy be implemented for the response to incidents of domestic violence.

The taskforce is also advocating improvements to the current restraining order laws. Among their recommendations are to permit teens to secure restraining orders against their abusive teen dating partners. Currently adults can secure restraining orders against abusive intimate partners, but minors can only secure orders against abusive adults.

"The issue of domestic violence crosses socio-economic and ethnic boundaries as well as party lines. I'm proud to join with others in the legislature in identifying ongoing problems with the domestic violence laws and in efforts to better assist victims and their families. I believe the Task Force has put forward significant recommendations to solve

these flaws in the law," said State Representative Clark Chapin (R- New Milford).

Exposure to family violence has a lasting and traumatic impact on children, and recent studies have shown a strong link between untreated traumatic exposure and cancer, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, lifelong mental health difficulties, incarceration, unemployment, violence and early death. In response to this, the task force would also like to incorporate trauma-informed care principles in the treatment of domestic violence victims to prevent chronic physical and behavioral health consequences and avoid the costs of managing chronic illness later in life.

The recommendations arose from a series of meetings and public hearings the task force held to hear from domestic violence advocacy groups, survivors, law enforcement professionals including prosecutors and judges, and others about the next steps the legislature could take to augment the domestic violence reforms enacted last year.

"I am very pleased with the accomplishments made by the Domestic Violence Task Force this session," said State Representative Terrie Wood (R-Darien). "These recommendations will better prepare both the judicial branch and health care professionals to handle these sensitive situations in a positive and productive manner. I hope that the General Assembly gives these ideas serious consideration."

The task force, created by Speaker Donovan, was responsible for introducing and leading passage of a three-part package of reforms during the 2010 session that led to the most sweeping changes to the state's domestic violence statutes in almost 25 years. Additional information about the task force can be found on its web site at: <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/DV>.

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