

TO: Rep. Maxine Grad, Chair
Rep. Willem Jewett, Vice Chair
House Committee on Judiciary

Hi my name is Brittany Lafirira and I am the Youth Advocate at IHOPE Works, a rape crisis center in Burlington, Vermont. I work with youth ages 13 to 24 that are survivors of sexual violence. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

In my role as a youth advocate I participate in a rotation providing legal advocacy in the civil court. By allowing 16 year olds to apply for stalking orders and allowing other caring adults to apply on behalf of a minor it would reduce the number of cases being denied in the civil court and would make youth seeking protection orders feel safer.

I have worked with several homeless youth that could have benefitted from sexual assault and stalking orders, but could not apply for one because of their age. One survivor I worked with is a 17-year-old girl named Elizabeth. She's a tall girl with big brown eyes. She identifies as a queer youth and because of this she had a falling out with her parents so she has been homeless for about a year. She is working with a local shelter to gain stable housing. She has done really well in this program, so she was able to move from the shelter to a transitional apartment where she has taken on a portion of the financial responsibilities. In this transitional housing she was at home spending time in a common space when another member of the program made sexually explicit gestures and threatening comments to her. This has happened a few times with this resident and she was concerned for her safety and the safety of her peers. Elizabeth called my office and

we scheduled a time to meet. While talking about what happened Elizabeth couldn't look at me. She was embarrassed and mad. She also disclosed that this was even more upsetting because she had been sexually assaulted in the past. We talked about her options and they were very limited.

Elizabeth is only 17 and was not able to apply for a civil protection order by herself and didn't have any immediate family to apply on her behalf. Elizabeth and I met with program staff and their solution to the problem didn't make her feel safe. The other resident was allowed to keep his place in the apartment and she was told that staff would check in with him. She identified that having a protection order in place, a written document that she could reference, would help her feel more secure in her living environment. Elizabeth has made a safety plan with her friends to never be alone in the common spaces of the apartment. She continues to work with program staff to get the perpetrator moved to a different floor or closer to the staff office where he can be monitored more closely. Elizabeth continues to spend time with groups of people or away from her apartment in order to feel safe.

We have worked with several young people, just like Elizabeth who could benefit from a change of to this law. Thank you again for listening to this story today and for helping to create meaningful changes in the Vermont State Law that will help create safety for survivors of violence.