



**VERMONT
LEGAL
AID**

To: House Committee on Judiciary
From: Laura Bierley, Victims' Rights Project, Vermont Legal Aid
Date: January 3, 2024
Re: H. 27

Thank you for inviting Vermont Legal Aid to participate in the input for H.27; an act relating to coercive controlling behavior and abuse prevention orders. On behalf of the victims and survivors we represent - Vermont Legal Aid supports H.27.

While our abuse prevention statutes have, until now, focused on physical and sexual abuse, lawyers and advocates have come to know that domestic violence is not merely physical and that all too often it isn't physical violence that causes the most harm. Bones heal; bruises fade. The physical signs of abuse are gone in days, weeks, or months. The mental and emotional toll lasts far longer. I hope that Vermont will join the growing list of states embracing a far more sophisticated understanding of domestic violence by including coercive control.

Our local Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence programs have long recognized that coercive control is a significant part of abuse. The power and control wheel has become ubiquitous in domestic violence prevention trainings and is familiar to all our states attorneys, advocates and lawyers. The power and control wheel was created in 1984. But nearly 40 years later, our statutes do not recognize coercive controlling behavior as the abuse that it is.

Coercive control is abuse. It isn't easy to identify from the outside; we can't photograph it like a bruise, x-ray it like a broken bone, or even document it as part of a physical exam. But it is abuse. It has always been abuse. It is time to name it as such and provide victims tools to become survivors of that abuse.

It won't be easy to implement this change. We are used to confining abuse prevention to the physical and at Vermont Legal Aid we have real concerns about these statutes being weaponized by perpetrators who are becoming increasingly adept at using the court system to abuse their victims. But with training and an open mind we can bring Vermont's abuse prevention laws into the 21st century and help survivors break the cycle of violence.