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**TO:** Sen. Ruth Hardy, Chair  
Senate Committee on Government Operations

**FROM:** Erin Jacobsen  
Assistant Attorney General  
Director, Community Justice Unit  
Office of the Attorney General

**DATE:** March 15, 2023

**RE:** Support for S.17, An act relating to sheriff reforms, 2023 legislative session

I write to express the Attorney General's Office's support for S.17, and in particular, the two provisions that connect directly to the work of the office. Specifically, the creation of an oversight task force and the duty for sheriffs to accompany abuse victims in the retrieval of their personal belongings.

Regarding the task force, we can keep our remarks short and say simply that we welcome the opportunity to work alongside our stakeholder partners to examine reforms and accountability measures for Vermont's Sheriffs' Departments.

The remainder of this memo pertains to the other provision that connects to the office's work, namely, Section 11 of S.17. That section would create a duty for Vermont's sheriffs to assist abuse victims leaving their homes by accompanying them in the retrieval of their belongings, at no cost. These so-called "standby services" provide crucial protections for people who may not otherwise be safe moving out of abusive situations.

The Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission (DVFRC), jointly administered by our office and the Council on Domestic Violence, has long recognized the importance of stand-by services and the need for such services to be available consistently across all jurisdictions and in a way that eliminates cost and other barriers to getting this critical assistance.

The DVFRC has repeatedly communicated about the need for stand-by services and first did so nearly a decade ago in its 2014 report. More recently, in its [2020 report](#), the Commission noted why legislative action was needed for a safe and effective stand-by process. It wrote:

The Commission recognizes that a standardized, affordable process for all parties is necessary to promote victim safety when a protective order is issued and one party needs to return to a formerly shared residence to obtain their belongings. Generally, sheriff departments in Vermont have provided this “stand-by” service, but the process and cost varies from county to county and there is no requirement that they offer this service. If a department chooses to discontinue “stand-by” services, domestic violence victims may be left with no safe method for obtaining belongings or giving defendant access to their belongings. The process can be difficult to navigate, which leads to added stress and potential risk if the parties resort to other methods.

Currently, though many law enforcement agencies and sheriffs offices provide stand-by services, these services are not mandated by statute, nor does every office or agency always have adequate resources to support them. Therefore, access can be inconsistent, unavailable, or, in some cases, costly to the victims. Our office is aware of instances in which sheriffs have refused to offer this service. In those cases, some victims were able to make arrangements with sheriffs from different counties, but only if they could pay mileage. Depending on the geographic locations of the needy party and the willing sheriff’s office, both cost and logistics can be a significant barrier at a crucial time. The point at which survivors take steps like getting protection orders and separating from abusers are known to be periods of high lethality. Having law enforcement present is critical to victim safety, and survivors should not have to rely on friends or family members to accompany them into dangerous situations.

For all of these reasons, the office supports S.17’s creation of statutorily mandated, uniform, and consistent “stand-by services” by sheriffs’ departments at no cost to victims. We would also hope that the necessary resources will be allocated to the departments so that they can effectively and reliably provide these services.