



## **Introductory Testimony – Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence**

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Thank you for the invitation to speak with the committee today about the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, our Member Organizations, and our policy priorities for this biennium.

The Vermont Network is our state's leading voice on domestic and sexual violence. The Vermont Network is a statewide non-profit organization and federally designated coalition of domestic and sexual violence programs in Vermont. Every state and territory in the United States has a statewide coalition like the Vermont Network.

The Vermont Network is a membership organization. Our members are 15 independent, non-profit organizations that offer direct services to survivors of violence and prevention programming in their communities. Together, they serve survivors in every town in Vermont.

Member Organizations' services are always free and available to all survivors, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, language, immigration status, ability, or whether they take any criminal or civil legal action.

In 2023, Member Organizations answered 23,000 hotline and chatline calls from individuals seeking support and reached over 15,000 Vermonters through education and prevention activities. Key components of their services include:

- **Confidential Support:** Members offer confidential, survivor-centered support. Unlike state-based victim advocates in Vermont, Member Organization advocates are fully confidential and covered by Vermont crisis worker privilege.
- **24/7 Hotlines & Chatline:** Members offer 24/7 access to hotline with crisis intervention, safety planning, referrals, and more via call or text.
- **Legal Advocacy:** Member advocates share information on legal issues, help navigate legal systems and complete paperwork, make referrals to low- or pro-bono attorneys, and provide emotional support in the courtroom.
- **Emergency & Transitional Housing:** Members provide emergency housing for individuals fleeing violence and assist survivors in finding safe, permanent housing. Many also have transitional housing programs offering medium-length stays.

- **Children's Services:** Members provide specialized services for children and youth, including support and healing programming and youth organizing initiatives.
- **Prevention:** Members provide educational and prevention programming in schools, faith communities, and for allied professionals and others.

In addition to supporting its members, the Vermont Network operates several statewide direct service programs, including:

- **Legal Clinic:** Vermont Network operates a small legal clinic where attorneys answer questions, give legal advice, and provide representation.
- **DIVAS:** The Vermont Network operates DIVAS, a program with in-person advocacy and support for incarcerated survivors of violence out of the women's Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility.
- **Deaf Vermonters Advocacy Services (DVAS):** DVAS provides culturally and linguistically relevant services to meet the needs of deaf, deaf/blind, and hard of hearing Vermonters. DVAS provides direct services, training, and education to support survivors and prevent violence.
- **Vermont Forensic Nursing Program:** The Vermont Network manages Vermont's Forensic Nursing Program. It trains, supports, and certifies a group of skilled nurses to provide forensic medical care to victims of domestic and sexual violence and collect evidence with a standardized evidence kit.
- **Domestic Violence Accountability Programs (DVAPs):** Vermont Network staff provide oversight and certification, financial management, and technical assistance to DVAPs. DVAPs offer intervention and accountability programming to people who cause harm in intimate partner relationships.

As Vermont's leading voice on domestic and sexual violence, the Vermont Network promotes policies that seek to uproot the causes of violence and support the well-being of survivors, their families, and Vermont communities. We would like to highlight four issues from the Vermont Network's 2025 Legislative Agenda that may be of interest to your committee.

### **1) Sustainable Funding for Domestic and Sexual Violence Service Providers**

Despite their essential work, members of the Vermont Network have been largely flat funded through Vermont's Domestic and Sexual Violence Fund for 15 years.

The fund supports \$784,000 in expenses annually. These funds are distributed among the Vermont Network's 15 members using a funding formula, with allocations ranging from \$11,000 to \$45,000 annually per organization.

Its funding mechanisms – a portion of surcharges on criminal offenses, civil penalties, and marriage license fees – see annual shortfalls. The Vermont legislature has had to make annual one-time appropriations to make the fund whole for several years in a row.

With the increased need for services, complexity of cases, and lengths of stay in shelter – on top of inflationary pressures – this funding is unsustainable. We support establishing a new and sustainable revenue source for the fund and other investments to meet the need for services.

## **2) Preventing Device-Related Stalking and Promoting Vehicle Access and Safety**

As technology evolves, our laws must respond with new safeguards to protect survivors' safety and privacy. We are supporting a package to improve vehicle safety, protect survivors' access to vehicles, and update definitions of device-related stalking.

- **Protections for Users of App-Connected Vehicles:** Some modern cars can be paired with smartphone apps that allow users to track the car's location from their phone. California and New York have passed legislation that requires automakers to enable drivers to remove an abusive partner's remote access to their vehicle, so GPS tracking features cannot be weaponized. We're advocating for similar safeguards in Vermont.
- **Requesting Primary Possession of a Vehicle in a Protection Order:** A domestic violence protection order is a court order that requires a perpetrator of violence to maintain physical distance from a survivor. With an order, a survivor can request forms of relief to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. The statute explicitly lists forms of relief, including primary possession of a residence, pets, or children. Currently, the statute doesn't explicitly list a vehicle, though it can be a lifeline for survivors. We are advocating for its explicit addition to the statute.
- **Updating Civil Definitions of Device-Related Stalking:** Devices – like Airtags – are increasingly being used to monitor individuals without their consent. Using models from other states, we are advocating for update to definitions in Vermont's civil stalking protection order statute to better capture and protect against device-related stalking.

## **3) Protections for Survivors of Coerced Debt**

Coerced debt occurs when a person utilizes coercive control or identity theft to incur debt in the name of an individual. The debt and poor credit score resulting from coerced debt can have long-term consequences, creating barriers to education, housing, and employment opportunities.

States – from Texas to Connecticut – have passed financial protections to provide relief to victims of coerced debt. We are advocating for similar legislation to create a process for

survivors' to request creditors cease collecting on coerced debt and remove coerced debt from their credit report.

#### **4) Creating 24-Hour Access to Sexual Assault Protection Orders**

Sexual assault protection orders are a critical legal tool for survivors of sexual violence. Currently, survivors can only request a sexual assault protection order during regular court orders, leaving them at risk when emergencies occur on evenings and weekends. We support creating 24-hour access to sexual assault protection orders, so survivors have access to protective measures when they need them.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We would be happy to answer any questions.