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**TESTIMONY OF LAURA FERNANDEZ
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Before The Senate Standing Committee on Social Services and
The Senate Standing Committee on Women's Issues
Continuum of Care for Gender-Based Violence Survivors
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Good afternoon. I am Laura Fernandez, Senior Director of the Clinical Department at Sanctuary for Families, New York State's largest provider of comprehensive services for survivors of domestic violence, trafficking, and related forms of gender-based violence. We are so grateful for the opportunity to testify today at this Joint Committee Hearing on the critical topic of the continuum of care available for abuse survivors and their families. Our special thanks to Senator Roxanne Persaud, Chair of the Social Services Committee; and Senator Lea Webb, Chair of the Women's Issues Committee, for the invitation to testify here today.

Sanctuary for Families has over 240 staff spread out across six offices in all five boroughs of New York City, as well as five shelters and a public hospital-based service center for people in the sex trade. These staff provide life-saving, life-changing services including licensed mental health counseling for adults and children; emergency and transitional shelter; legal advice and representation; and career training and placement, which last year reached 8,000 adults and children/teens. Services are available in 30 languages spoken by staff (and many more through volunteer translators as well as a language line offering simultaneous interpretation), supplemented by a broad program of community preventive outreach and trainings that reach many thousands more concerned New Yorkers—from immigrant groups, to school children and teens, to professional audiences including judges, pro bono attorneys, and healthcare professionals.

Sanctuary prides itself on its holistic service provision which strives to meet clients wherever they are on their journey from crisis to survival, on to stability, and ultimately toward self-sufficiency. Thousands of clients come to us in crisis, and we provide emergency food, rent for eviction prevention, and utilities payments—over \$1.7 million in emergency financial and material aid last year. We also provide shelter and supportive services, trauma counseling, and emergency legal assistance such as orders of protection to help clients achieve safety. We help clients achieve stability, from legal immigration status to divorce and safe child custody arrangements, to obtaining or reinstating public benefits. Then, we help them achieve empowerment and financial freedom, through our career training program, worker co-op, and participation in survivor leadership programs.

Our long-term goal is to ensure that clients achieve stable, independent, violence-free homes and lives for themselves and their children. As service providers, we are all too aware of the drivers that keep victims from leaving abusive situations, and that push them back into these situations after they leave. As you surely know, the cost of domestic violence emergency services to New York City and State is enormous: shelter stays, emergency room visits, and in too many cases, a cycle that repeats again and again over months or years if the survivor is not able to attain stability. That is why we emphasize the continuum of care for survivors and their families.

Yet it is a perpetual challenge to deliver these services when already scarce state funding is cut further. Last year, our VOCA grants through the State Office of Victim Services were cut by approximately 25%, nearly \$350,000 in annual funding that supports vital clinical and legal services. And we were notified by OVS this summer that there are likely to be even deeper cuts in the third year of these already reduced contracts. Sanctuary and a statewide coalition of advocates worked tirelessly to compel Governor Hochul to add VOCA funds to her Executive Budget in 2021 to keep crime victim service providers whole. Now, as we confront heightened incidence of domestic violence, and a surge of deeply vulnerable refugees in our city and state, many of them survivors of gender based violence (and/or at deep risk of exploitation), we simply cannot afford further reductions.

In addition, emergency federal funds that were made available during the pandemic have now dissipated. These were funds through which we were able to provide critically needed emergency food and other basic needs support for clients. We have some private grants that support these costs, and modest allocations on some public grants, but it is not nearly enough, as we know that food insecurity remains one of the most urgent issues for thousands of vulnerable families.

Housing also is a key area where so many abuse survivors are struggling. When we think about the continuum of care, there is no greater push factor than lack of affordable, permanent housing that keeps people in violent homes or brings them back when they do manage to leave. Far too often, landlords are wary or even refuse to accept some of the housing vouchers issued by NYC, which they do not consider stable. The only truly reliable voucher program that is widely accepted by landlords is Section 8. If more Section 8 vouchers could be made available to abuse survivors, it would have a huge impact for long-term positive outcomes.

There are many other actions the State can take to help us overcome the challenges we face in providing a high-quality, empowering continuum of care to thousands more abuse survivors and families in the year ahead. We were so pleased when the Fair Access to Victim Compensation Act was passed this spring, loosening the unreasonably strict requirements for crime victims to access funds to help them heal; now Governor Hochul needs to sign it. We urgently need to see improvements in the family court system in our state: abuse survivors are at greater risk than ever of losing custody of their children, and with the severe shortage of family court judges, the wait times for case adjudication create profoundly unsafe situations. We also need the state to look seriously at the deplorable conditions in the state's women's prisons, where inmates face poor medical and dental treatment, sexual abuse and harassment from guards, and a host of other health and safety issues. There was a major breakthrough this spring, with legislation mandating body scanners in the prisons to replace the invasive, traumatizing strip searches inmates are subjected to when returning from legal, medical, or family visits. But progress in all of these arenas is slow.

As always, the most important action New York State can take is to fully fund the work of domestic violence and other human service providers. Public funding is the main driver of human service salaries, which, under current City and State contracts, result in some of the lowest paid workers in New York's economy. Contracts also rarely account for even modest cost of living adjustments from year to year. Like many of our peers, Sanctuary supplements salaries and benefits above these contracted funding levels to pay fair living wages, and covers COLA each year whether contracts pay for it or not. We urgently ask for your help in taking care of the workers who serve our most vulnerable neighbors by (1) approving a COLA for all human service contracts, a decision that currently is at the discretion of different administering agencies; and (2) ensuring that our human service contracts are kept whole, so we do not constantly need to worry about whether we will need to make cuts in life-saving service programs next year, or the year after.

On behalf of Sanctuary for Families, we want to thank the Committee on Social Services and Committee on Women's Issues for providing this important oversight hearing, and giving us the opportunity to testify. Please do not hesitate to contact Sanctuary for Families if you have any questions.