

**TESTIMONY RE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS AND PREVENTION  
BEFORE THE SENATE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE  
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**Introduction:** Thank you, Chair Muth and Senator Schwank for holding a hearing today to raise awareness about domestic violence. My name is Beth Garrigan, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Safe Berks, the domestic violence service provider in Berks County.

**History and Overview:** In 1976, twelve dedicated Berks County women met at the YWCA in Reading to discuss the details of providing hotline, counseling, and temporary housing services to victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence. They were pioneers locally and statewide, as they sought to find solutions to end family violence and to help all victims. They attended the first meeting of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV) held on November 12, 1976, in Lancaster and became one of the Coalition's first members. They worked tirelessly, putting together the framework for Berks Women in Crisis, also known as BWIC, to make families safe, piece by piece. They pooled their resources and pursued the support of the greater Reading community. They did not give up and the community responded. Our "Founding Mothers" even courageously provided shelter to survivors of domestic violence in their own homes.

In 2016, BWIC celebrated our 40th anniversary, and celebrated our new name – Safe Berks. This new name is important because we serve all survivors – not just women – and survivors do not need to be in crisis to get services, we are here when they are ready, even if it is years later. Our new name is also our goal—a Safe Berks.

The Latinx Community in Berks County is the largest, per capita, in the state, and Safe Berks has worked diligently over the years to improve outreach and services to this community, including ensuring that a large percentage of our staff members are bilingual/bicultural and encouraging leadership of Latinx staff within the organization.

Safe Berks makes a deliberate effort to visit gathering spots that attract and/or serve unserved/underserved communities to provide Safe Berks brochures and Hotline cards and offer speaking opportunities to promote awareness of our life saving services. Safe Berks also take advantage of every opportunity to have a link to our website added to partnering organizations' websites and/or an ad with our logo and services in as many publications as possible throughout the County.

**Overview:** Safe Berks provides comprehensive services to victims of Domestic Violence and/or Sexual Assault. However, the funding we receive is often restricted to very specific services and leaves little to no room for unforeseen needs survivors may have when they leave an abusive situation. With very few exceptions, our direct care staff receive numerous requests for supportive services such as gas, bus passes, childcare assistance, pet food, car repairs, a photo id, replacing social security cards, from each survivor they meet. These needs include things we take for granted every day but because of the power and control their abuser holds over them, they are many times, literally starting over with zero resources to depend on. Sadly, even though these things are necessary to sustain independence and safety, core funding limits and/or does not support assisting survivors with these needs. In addition, very

little funding is unrestricted so there are many times our survivors have needs that are not supported by the funding we receive. There is nothing more devastating than providing the necessary supports to provide the initial safety to a survivor which is where hope and healing begins, only to see them return to an unsafe, and potentially deadly situation, because their ongoing needs could not be met.

An example of this we recently experienced began when a Safe Berks Medical Advocacy Program (MAPP) Specialist responded to one of our local hospitals late one night to meet with a blind, older adult patient who disclosed ongoing extensive physical abuse by her ex-husband. She explained to our MAPP Specialist that she was forced to continue living with him because her Power of Attorney is their son, and he was forcing her to stay in the home. We assisted her with filing a Temporary Protection From Abuse order from the hospital, provided advocacy and accompaniment at police and legal interviews, and represented her in court as a 3-year final order was put into place. She repeatedly shares that had we not been at the hospital that night, she would have returned to the abusive home because she felt she had no other alternatives. In this situation, much like so many other situations we encounter daily, she needed additional supports that our core services funding does not support, and we scrambled to seek assistance from other community providers prior to her release from the hospital. Thankfully, we were able to connect her to a local agency that serves older adults for assistance with the needs we could not provide such as transportation, in-home cleaning, food, late mortgage and utility bill payments, necessities, and legal assistance in having her son's Power of Attorney revoked. There are many situations where critical needs such as food, safe and affordable housing, childcare, mental health services, etc. cannot be met by Safe Berks core services funding and other community organizations are unable to assist or the waitlist is so long, so survivors return to the abusive home out of desperation. This is tragic. But until additional funding is available to support survivors holistically, we exhaust all options in an attempt to support their continued safety.

**Safe Berks Services:** In 2023, our shelter, or Safe House, began transitioning into a stand-alone department. Historically, the Safe House staff provided day to day oversight of the shelter, answered the Hotline and Text line, and provided Case management services to residents of the Safe House. Separating these three key roles into stand-alone departments allows Safe House staff an opportunity to focus on the day-to-day needs of survivors and provide support as they adjust to a communal living environment.

**Crisis:** In March 2023, Safe Berks created a separate Crisis Services Department, led by a Director of Crisis Services. This department has 14 FT and PT Crisis Hotline and Intake Advocates who are located onsite and respond to our 24/7/365 Hotline, Text line, and incoming email inquiries. Calls are answered in English and Spanish, and any other language is available through interpretation services. Callers are provided with crisis intervention, crisis counseling, support, safety planning, and information about Safe Berks and other community resources. Visitors to Safe Berks' website can reach our Crisis Services Department by emailing [peace@safeberks.org](mailto:peace@safeberks.org).

The Crisis Services Department also provides phone assessments with individuals seeking emergency shelter as well as respond to calls made to the Hotline by Law Enforcement, Healthcare professionals, and/or Community organizations actively working with a survivor. Advocates also respond to any walk-in survivors seeking emergency services. They identify

survivor needs through assessment and connect them with necessary services. If emergency shelter is needed, they complete the intake process and assign a case manager.

**Emergency Shelter/Safe House:** Safe Berks' Safe House provides emergency shelter to victims of domestic and/or sexual violence who have also experienced multiple layers of trauma. In March 2023, Safe Berks enhanced the services offered in the Safe House by creating 14 FT and PT Residential Services Advocate (RSA) positions, led by the Director of Residential Services. The RSA are responsible for assuring residents' basic needs are met including food, clothing, and personal care items. They also provided 24/7 support in adjusting to communal living, assistance with life skills, and provide opportunities to engage with community resources. The Safe House also has an RSA/Drug & Alcohol Counselor who works directly with survivors with needs specific to substance use disorder. A Residential Children's Advocate also facilitates a 'Ready to Read' program for children from pre-school age through 3rd grade, provides emotional support to children coming from violent homes, coordinates services with community agencies, provides basic tutoring as needed, and implements daily, age-appropriate activities for all children living in the Safe House.

**Case Management:** Another enhancement implemented in March 2023 was the creation of a stand-alone Case Management Department. Led by a Director of Case Management, three full time case managers assist Safe House residents in developing individual goal plans and ensure survivors are receiving a full range of services with Safe Berks and other community organizations, as needed. They also coordinate exit plans and assist survivors in establishing and maintaining a continuum of services.

The Case Management department also provides assistance with securing the numerous supportive service needs of any Berks County survivor. This stand-alone department fosters self-empowerment and healing and provides survivors exiting the Safe House with a support system as they restore their sense of safety.

**Counseling:** Safe Berks Counseling Department, guided by our Licensed Therapist, provides trauma-informed, empowerment counseling to children, teens, and adult survivors of sexual violence. Services are also available to non-offending significant others (family members, caregivers, etc.) who have been impacted by the trauma. In addition to managing the Counseling Department, our Licensed Therapist completes biopsychosocial assessments and provides short-term Solution-Focused Therapy and biopsychosocial to Safe House residents and connects them with additional mental health treatment services and/or medication resources, as necessary.

Counseling services are short-term, client-focused and are offered in-person, virtually or over the phone to assist survivors with barriers to seeking in person services at Safe Berks. Both individual and group counseling is available to all survivors. Two of our counselors are bilingual/bicultural and can provide all services in English and Spanish. The third counselor is fluent in Creole. For all other languages, including ASL, the counselors utilize an interpreter service. If the counselor assesses that there is a need for a higher level of care, they will assist the survivor by connecting with a trauma therapist or other supportive services in the community for more specialized care.

**Financial Empowerment and Rapid Rehousing:** The Counseling Department also has a Financial Empowerment Specialist who facilitates a four-week Financial Empowerment Program and provides individual financial counseling. Domestic violence almost always includes financial

abuse, preventing victims from leaving and according to NCADV “between 21-60% of victims of intimate partner violence lose their jobs due to reasons stemming from the abuse.” Some survivors are never permitted to enter the workforce at all, and lack of income is often a common reason victims cite for staying in or returning to abusive partners. Domestic and sexual violence survivors also face significant barriers in sustaining long term employment at a living wage. For many, it is very challenging to focus on finding or maintaining employment while living in a domestic violence shelter, even though their ability to secure temporary or permanent housing is directly tied to their income/employment status. It is the very uncertainty and temporary nature of their day to day living situation that makes it challenging to take the necessary proactive steps to begin their journey to self-sufficiency. The program assists survivors in learning basic budgeting skills, credit repair, job search/interview skills and basic banking skills. Survivors seeking educational opportunities such as GED, ESL, Certificate courses, etc., are introduced to representatives from Reading Area Community College (RACC) where these options are offered just a block away from our facility. A community member and Safe Berks supporter has generously donated funds to support any/all educational costs associated with a survivor seeking training/educational opportunities at RACC. This generous donation has already fully supported all costs not covered by financial aid for several survivors in Berks County. Safe Berks partners with a local credit union, so participants can open a bank account, create a savings goal, and work towards a match to the monies saved, supported by a small grant through a local foundation. The program also offers periodic on-site job fairs with employers that work closely with Safe Berks to offer employment opportunities to our survivors. The Financial Empowerment Specialist also oversees Safe Berks’ Rapid Rehousing grant and works with survivors in connecting with the resources necessary to seek, secure and maintain safe and affordable housing.

**Community Outreach and Response:** In 2022, Safe Berks created a Community Outreach and Response Department, or COR Department, which also provides 24/7/365 crisis services. The COR Department advocates meet with survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault out in the community because we know meeting with survivors where they feel safe and comfortable helps alleviate barriers to receiving services. Since its inception, the COR department has grown to include 10 staff. The COR Department staff include MAPP (Medical Advocacy Partnership Program) Specialists, MAPP/ Rapid Response Advocates, CSRs (Community Response Specialists), CRS/SART/LAP Specialist (Sexual Assault Response Team and Lethality Assessment Program), CRS/CAC Coordinator (Childrens Alliance Center), a Director of COR and Asst Director of COR.

The CRS/CAC Coordinator provides victim advocacy services at Childrens Alliance Center appointments, including support during and orientation to, the forensic interview and subsequent processes. They also provide relevant resource information for caregivers/parents and/or significant others of child victims of sexual abuse about and referral to Safe Berks and other resources throughout Berks County as well as information about Crime Victims Compensation. They also attend Multi-Disciplinary Investigative Team meetings, Victim Advocacy meetings, and the CAC Advisory Board Meetings.

MAPP Specialists are located onsite at the three major medical facilities in Berks County (Tower Health Reading Hospital, Penn State Health St. Joseph, and Berks Community Health Center) and respond to other healthcare facilities throughout Berks County. MAPP Specialists provide in person accompaniment during forensic exams, crisis intervention and support, safety planning, information about community resources, advocacy, and a warm handoff to Safe Berks services. They also participate in SANE trainings, actively participate on both major hospitals

DV and SV task forces, provide training and education to new and current medical professionals on domestic and sexual violence and the response to victims, and provide outreach to affiliated and private clinics throughout Berks County.

The CEO, Managing Director of Community Engagement, and Director of Community Outreach & Response facilitate, along with a Safe Berks Board member, the Healthcare Advisory Committee. The Committee was formed in 2019 and strives to educate the healthcare community on victim centered, patient focused care when working with survivors of domestic and/or sexual violence. The Director of COR and MAPP Specialists also provide training to medical students as part of their rotation and teach classes on domestic and sexual violence and response to victim/survivors at nursing classes. In March 2022, the Tower Health onsite MAPP Specialist began providing training to all Tower Health new hires during their orientation process and in 2023, the PSHSJ MAPP Advocate began training new hires and nursing staff.

MAPP/Rapid Response Advocates are located onsite at the local Courthouse and the two major hospitals between the hours of 6pm and 4am seven days a week to provide forensic exam accompaniment, crisis intervention and support, safety planning, information about community resources, advocacy, and a warm handoff to Safe Berks services, as needed. They are also available to assist victims/survivors seeking emergency Protection From Abuse Orders/ Sexual Violence Protection Orders at night court.

Legal: Two Legal Advocates are available to assist victim/survivors with obtaining Protection From Abuse (PFA) Orders/ Sexual Violence Protection Orders (SVPOs), offer support at the PFA office, Prothonotary's office, Sheriff's office, and in courtrooms, provide accompaniment at police interviews, meetings with DA's office, preliminary hearings, PFA contempt hearings, trials, and sentencing hearings, safety plan, and connect survivors with information and/or referrals to Safe Berks services as well as other services, as needed, throughout Berks County.

Legal representation to survivors at final PFA and SVPO hearings before the Court of Common Pleas can be provided by Safe Berks' Director of Legal Services. Survivors with specific needs regarding legal support and assistance with custody, divorce, are provided with a referral and warm handoff to Safe Berks service providers such as Community Justice Project, Mid Penn Legal, and Pennsylvania Immigrant Resource Center.

**Education and Outreach:** Safe Berks Education and Outreach Department provides prevention programming in elementary and middle schools and has developed a high school program as well. Safe Berks sought private funding to support the critical work of providing this programming to all Berks County School Districts. Berks County's largest Public School, Reading School District, has 19 schools-including 13 elementary schools, five middle schools and one senior high school. Reading School District has more than 17,800 students and approximately 2,000 staff members and is the fourth largest school district in Pennsylvania. It is critical that our youth learn how individuals are impacted by their relationships, communities, and the policies, culture, and media of the environments in which they live and learn how intimate partner violence exists because of the larger oppressions that lead to inequities in access to power and resources across groups of people.

Safe Berks' Education and Outreach Department also offers a "menu" of training opportunities that is shared with local employers, community organizations, faith-based groups, etc. Safe Berks staff are available to provide free training on domestic and/or sexual violence, Mandated

Reporter, Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, trauma related to domestic and sexual violence, human trafficking, and Safe Berks Services.

**Camp Safe Berks**, which serves 25+ youth ages 13-18 each year, is a five-day free summer day camp and follow-up program facilitated by the Education and Outreach Department that addresses the roots of oppression (sexism, racism, adultism, classism, heterosexism, and others) as the roots of violence in our society. Camp Safe Berks recruits a volunteer facilitation team of individuals with experience working with youth. Each month, after camp ends, the youth meet with the Education and Outreach team for “Camp Meetups” and engage in conversation and activities that they are encouraged to take back to their social circles and schools.

In July 2023, Safe Berks will offer a second Camp for youth ages 10-12.

The Educators also provide education and awareness programs to children and youth in community setting focused on Healthy Relationships, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault, Consent, Dating Violence, Red Flags, Consent, Internet Safety, Bullying and Harassment, and other topics.

**Awareness:** All Safe Berks staff members and volunteers participate in Community Events and Health Fairs in multiple settings throughout the year, raising awareness of domestic and sexual violence and Safe Berks services. Public projects include local versions of the Vagina Monologues, Clothesline Project, Pinwheel Project, Wear Teal Day, Sexual Assault Awareness Month, Take Back the Night at local colleges, and Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) Nurse Awareness. Audiences include college campuses, hospitals, schools, workplaces, faith-based organizations, Community organizations, and other public spaces.

Safe Berks distributes news releases and public service announcements and makes social media posts to raise awareness about sexual violence and Safe Berks resources, led by our Communications Coordinator.

Each year in June, Safe Berks' Development Committee facilitates a Walk For NO MORE. The Walk For NO MORE brings Safe Berks staff, volunteers, supporters, and survivors together to raise awareness and make a bold visual statement as we walk together down the center of a busy community street bearing matching t-shirts, signs, and chanting NO MORE Domestic Violence NO MORE Sexual Assault. This event kicks off Art On the Avenue, a premiere art and music festival offered yearly since 1994 and held rain or shine showcasing the work of local and regional artists, crafters, vendors, West Reading businesses, musicians and other talents. The event spans four pedestrian friendly blocks and boasts upwards of 200 vendors, is free, open to the public and well attended which provides an opportunity for Safe Berks to increase awareness.

Each year, in October which is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Safe Berks raises community awareness regarding domestic violence by recognizing the Silent Witness Project, a national and international initiative, that promotes, educates, and builds support to end domestic violence through powerful community-based exhibits. The four main goals of the national initiative are to remember those we have lost to domestic violence, raise awareness about the impact domestic violence has on our community, connect people to much-needed services, and to support legislative change.

In 2002, Safe Berks brought the Silent Witness Project to Berks County, and it has been recognized each year thereafter. In 1999, we began keeping a record of the number of those lost to domestic violence homicide and each year, Safe Berks staff, Board members, volunteers, community members, and loved ones of those who lost their life to domestic violence carry red life-size silhouette bearing a shield that tells the story of a person's tragic death. At our 2022 event, we recognized 80 Berks County lives lost to Domestic Violence.

**COVID 19 impact:** The COVID 19 pandemic forced Safe Berks to make a more deliberate effort to raise awareness to domestic and sexual violence and the services we provide and provide outreach to every corner of Berks County. Home was NOT a safe place for many during the pandemic. Isolation, limited access to support systems, the financial hardships resulting from lost wages, etc. in many cases added additional stress in households where relationships were already struggling.

**People Served:** Our efforts led to more people knowing who we are, what we do, and how we can help. And so, our numbers, in every department, are rising. To provide some perspective, the following numbers reflect the time frame 7/1/22-4/30/23:

- MAPP Specialists responded in person to 156 Domestic Violence, 97 Sexual Assault, and 8 Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault cases at local healthcare facilities
- Rapid Response advocates assisted 353 survivors in person after hours at the courthouse
- We provided Lethality Assessment Program training to 2 new police Departments and trained 20 newly hired Reading Police Officers
- The Legal department received 775 calls, provided 499 accompaniments, and assisted 246 survivors
- The Education and Outreach Department provided Primary Prevention Programming across 6 school buildings (4 middle schools in Reading SD, 1 elementary school in Wilson SD, and 1 Catholic school) reaching 2474 students.
- Safe House staff answered 1,267 Hotline calls and answered 173 texts in addition to responding to numerous social media and email notifications
- 163 children and 172 adults received emergency shelter with an average stay of 42 nights
- 29 adults and 30 children were placed in permanent housing with our Rapid Rehousing grant funds
- 51 adults received financial empowerment counseling
- 261 adults received individual counseling and/or participated in support groups
- And 55 children received individual counseling and/or participated in support groups

The COVID 19 Pandemic has forced Safe Berks, and other centers like ours, to reconfigure our limited shelter space to accommodate *more* survivors while adhering to suggested protocols to limit exposure to illness. We have also seen a significant increase in the number of survivors seeking shelter for their pets too. Many times, pets are a survivor's only support system and most times, pets are also victims of abuse. While we are fortunate to work closely with local shelters, their space is extremely limited and cannot accommodate emergency situations and ultimately, separating the survivor and the pet is even more traumatic. So, we have made rooms for pets too. With more survivors presenting with more complex situations, shelters like

ours have needed a lot of additional staff so we can provide the attention and intensive service delivery survivors need.

Sadly, our funding is not increasing to assist us in making these necessary changes. The majority of our funding is State and Federal, most of which has not increased in several years and in fact, is at risk of being reduced by FY 24.25. The limited or lack of funding cannot stop us from making the changes our survivors need, for if we do, more lives will be tragically lost to domestic violence. So, we are moving forward, making the changes and hope the funding will find us.