



Sara Gray, law student, Class of 2020

March 16, 2019

Chairwoman Quijano and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Sara Gray and I am a third-year student at Rutgers Law School in Camden. I am here as part of a course that teaches students about legislative process and action.

I am here with my Professor Ruth Anne Robbins and my fellow student Jo-Anna Daly. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding AJR115 establishing a "Domestic Violence and Legal Access Task Force." We have also submitted a written statement.

Currently in New Jersey, a person filing for a domestic violence restraining order or defending against one, has no right to a state-appointed attorney if they cannot afford one. These hearings are trials, a person who cannot afford a lawyer has to learn the area of law and then how to present their case. This includes submitting evidence, objecting, arguing the law, calling witnesses, and cross-examining witnesses. We are asking this of people who have no legal training and are in crisis.

I can tell you from experience, preparing and conducting a trial is very difficult. This semester I had to prepare and argue a *simulated* trial. It took a team of 4 students 7 weeks to prepare. It was challenging and it wasn't even about our lives. There were no consequences beyond our grades.

Access to my home was not at risk, time with my child was not at risk, and most importantly my personal safety was not at risk.

The State of New Jersey grants the right to a state-appointed attorney in cases where far less is at risk. For example, if you have an \$800 municipal fine you have a right to a state-appointed attorney. If your driver's license might be suspended, you have a right to a state-appointed attorney.

But at a domestic violence restraining order hearing there is no right to a state-appointed attorney. Where, if you are a defendant, you could lose access to your home, the ability to carry a service weapon, and have eighteen other legal consequences. Or, if you are a plaintiff seeking an order, your personal safety is at risk. This is not justice.

This Task Force would study what it would take to provide state-appointed attorneys to impoverished people involved in Domestic Violence restraining order hearings. Several other states are also studying this issue and New York has granted this right.

This bill is about convening experts to study this issue and possibly propose cost effective solutions.

Thank you for your time.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sara Gray', is positioned to the left of a vertical line.

Sara Gray, 3L law student