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Dear Education Policy Committee Member,

First Witness Child Advocacy Center is a non-profit agency based in Duluth, MN where we offer hope, healing, and justice for alleged victims of child abuse and their families. Our agency represents many organizations in northeast Minnesota who work together through our Multidisciplinary Team. In our community and as a community, we are a leader in preventing and responding to child abuse.

A core component of the work we do year-round is providing prevention education in schools and within the general community. Through our experience as an agency that has operated in our community for over 30 years, we see first-hand how prevention education in schools has the ability to stop child abuse before it starts. We strongly support the revisions to SF 3617 relating to requiring education on physical and sexual abuse. Specifically, section 1 (d), that refers to the requirement of child physical abuse prevention instruction in a health curriculum.

Each year, at least 1 in 7 children are abused in the U.S. (CDC, 2022). This number may be higher as the actual number of children abused is most likely underreported. No city or county is immune to child abuse and these statistics are reflected locally. Our region alone has experienced a 150% increase in reports of abuse over the last decade.

The need for our services continues to be the highest it has ever been. We know we must be able to respond to the needs of our community and work together to prevent child abuse from happening in the first place. Toxic stress from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (such as violence and abuse), can negatively affect children's brain development, immune systems, and stress-response systems which can affect children's attention, decision-making, and learning. Children growing up with toxic stress may have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships, have unstable work histories as adults, and struggle with finances, jobs, and depression throughout life. These effects can also be passed on to their own children. Some children may face further exposure to toxic stress from historical and ongoing traumas due to systemic racism or the impacts of poverty resulting from limited educational and economic opportunities. (CDC, 2022) Robert Block, former president of the American Academy of Pediatrics said, "Adverse Childhood Experiences are the single greatest unaddressed public health threat facing our nation today."

Evidence tells us that ACEs can be prevented by:

- Strengthening economic support for families
- Promoting social norms that protect against violence & adversity
- Ensuring a strong start for children and paving the way for them to reach their full potential
- Teaching skills to help parents and youth handle stress, manage emotions, and tackle everyday challenges
- Connecting youth to caring adults and activities
- Intervening to lessen immediate and long-term harms

**We stand with kids.**

First Witness offers evidence-based services and programs to help mitigate the chronic health outcomes of trauma and to prevent it from happening in the first place through our Safe and Strong Child© (SSC) prevention presentations. These presentations provide developmentally and age-appropriate curriculum to children, caregivers and school and community personnel in our region (southern St. Louis County, Carlton and Lake County) on the topic of body safety. Through this prevention education program, we empower children to identify safe and unsafe touch and demonstrate how to reach out to trusted adults for help. SSC curriculum is for pre-K to 6th grade children, their teachers and their parents. With SSC, we create change and end cycles of gender-based violence by bridging communities, building partnerships with schools, developing a common language around prevention, and empowering children, teachers and parents with information and tangible skills. SSC in our community means that we all work together to dissolve the shame families experience. We focus on eliminating misconceptions about child sexual abuse that leave children shouldering the burden of blame and secrecy and instead build a community response of positive interventions. We ensure that parents, school and community personnel have the tools necessary to respond to signs of abuse and disclosure.

Our team at First Witness, along with our partners, are constantly reviewing our prevention and education materials to ensure that they include multiple cultural perspectives and focus on community responsibility for ending child sexual and physical abuse and trafficking. We collaborate and/or partner with other organizations doing prevention and education activities to increase our impact and our commitment to cultural diversity, inclusive practices and equity.

In 2023, First Witness provided 280 prevention education presentations to 4,658 students and community members. We saw the number of forensic interviews we conducted drop from 213 interviews in 2022 to 199 interviews in 2023, but we still have work to do and more children to reach to continue preventing child abuse in our community – which would be positively impacted by the revisions of SF 3617.

As a national training center we also have developed a Train The Presenter Training for our Safe and Strong Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program. This training can be presented to school personnel, or community agency personnel.

Thank you for taking the time to read our letter of support for the revisions of SF 3617 – we hope we have conveyed how important and impactful these revisions could be to the children and families in our region and across Minnesota.

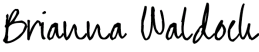
Sincerely,

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