

My name is Michelle Erhard; I am 27 years of age and a single mother of two girls.

As part of a safety plan I moved into my parent's house after 8 months of living in fear from my estranged husband.

Today it has been 3 years and 4 months since I left my abuser. Despite the horrific experiences during the last 8 years. I have become a VICTOR from Domestic Violence. Although, now I feel that I have become a victor from my abusive relationship; I have become a victim of the very system put in place to protect my daughters and me.

Last month I came to my first council meeting and shared some of my experiences. Although I received no responses or any suggestions on directions I could use. After the council meeting I did speak with two city employees regarding information I requested, these two individuals had heard about my complaints and I feel were offended because of their negative attitude towards my request. I made no direct complaint about any individual and I would like to apologize if they took it personally.

I am here tonight regarding further concerns that back my very concerns from my transcripts from, April 2, 2007, city council meeting. I had attended a visual for community awareness against Sexual abuse and Rape. I was so disappointed with the turn out of this event. I did not expect a large turn out from Victims themselves, because of the personal violation of this offense. However, there were roughly 25 people who attended this event. I am estimating 5 people who were reporters, 15 employees or volunteers from Rape Crisis of the Southern Tier and 5 Victims or individuals concerned about the education and training that schools need.

During the candle light visual, Rape Crisis of the Southern Tier discussed that Sexual abuse and rape is a national growing crime, while crime statistics are going down in other areas. RCST wanted to offer their support and the community's support so that victim could feel safe to come forward. A speaker continued to say, that sexual abuse and rape, is serious and taken seriously by law enforcement agencies and the judicial system. The message continued to share that victims are not alone and there are safe places to go.

I ask you, what was lacking from the message Rape Crisis of the Southern Tier was giving? In my opinion, what was lacking was ELECTED members, representatives of the city, county legislation, law enforcement, district attorney's office and court delegates. A victim's service agency is only as strong as the union that is behind it. The message of concern, safety and justice was not seriously taken if the people who are gainfully employed in the very system developed to create change policies and to protect the innocent.

I have recently worked with a web developer on a website, fightingforavoice.com. It is my way of having a voice. I have included a petition for Reform in Chemung County. Although, the policy model for unified court system has been in place, since 2005, and is in the process for other area counties, there are areas that could be started immediately in our county. Immediate changes that could be set in place are, new, training for officers of the law and judicial enforcement, regarding domestic violence. There are grants for these educational trainings. The local agencies also offer educational programs. The need of educational information in all grade levels regarding domestic violence and sexual abuse is available for all ages. Again these are available through state ran organizations and local victim service agencies. In the school district, new training for the teachers on how to respond to sexual harassment and physical, emotional harassment is needed. In my completed petition I will go through all the options that are available immediately and follow with the entire unified court system. I want to know and the community needs to know the effects, morally, financially and domestically the effects of Domestic Crimes and that Chemung County is ready to make the change to have stricter laws and a more unified system.

The petition is as follows:

Petition: We are the residents of Chemung County, New York; representing families of men and women who have been victims of Domestic Abuse. {OPDV} The cost to the victim of being involved with the criminal justice and legal system—in money, time, lost work, lost privacy, and retaliatory acts by the abuser—are daunting. Quite frequently, over time or simultaneously, a victim will be involved in a family offense proceeding, a civil contempt matter, custody, support, and visitation proceedings, a matrimonial action, and a criminal proceeding in multiple courts. This fragmentation, coupled with differing standards of proof, rules of procedure, and an extraordinary diversity of recordkeeping practices, exhausts resources and often demoralizes and inadvertently endangers victims and their children. As well as, using large amounts of taxpayers' money to finance the courts, court appointed attorneys, law guardians and judges. Early intervention and a coordinated response to domestic abuse provides the best path to protecting victims and their children, preventing the escalation of a pattern of abuse, reducing the rate of domestic homicide and felony crimes, and where possible, maintaining family stability. Not only should our legal and public safety institutions, such as police, probation departments, courts and prosecutor's offices, take affirmative action to accomplish these objectives, but also the individuals who work within any state or local government agencies should be retrained on the dynamics of domestic abuse and how to handle an occurring situation and where to report it. Under the integrated model, integrated court system, one judge handles criminal domestic violence cases and related family issues, such as custody, visitation, civil protection orders and matrimonial actions. By streamlining and centralizing court processes, integrated courts eliminate contradictory orders and improve victim safety. They also hold offenders to a higher level of accountability by concentrating responsibility for defendant oversight in the hands of a single judge. In addition, victims gain a greater voice in their cases and are better able to address critical family issues—such as economic dependence—that impede their ability to prosecute their abusers and, ultimately, to achieve Independence.

To view or sign this petition you may use the website, fightingforavoice.com. There will be paper petitions at several business locations, as well as advertised in an upcoming article about challenges I have faced throughout the past years. I have several volunteers to canvas areas, with the goal to gain as many signatures, comments as possible. I intend on compiling all information and presenting the petition, articles, supporting documentation at the end of July to local and state legislators. I will also be sending all the documentation to many agencies throughout NYS that are advocates to end violence against women.

I do have a copy of the petition here this evening and if you would like to review it at the end of the meeting and possibly add your signature for support, I will stay as long as you need.

I would like to thank you for your time and I look forward to any questions you may have regarding my intentions.