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FAX COVER SHEET

To: Governor Haley

From: Sharon Totherow

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URGENT: REGARDING THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TASK FORCE



February 11, 2015

Dear Governor Haley,

I want to start off by introducing myself, I am Sharon Totherow, I am the Director of Domestic Violence Assistance based in Greenville, SC. I started this 501©3 non-profit in October of 2007 and have run it myself all this time. I do not receive grants or funding (only because I do not know how to go about doing that). I help victims of domestic violence with things needed to start over. Each year, 100+ victims are referred to me by Safe Harbor, Safe Homes, other shelters, hospitals, churches, police officers, judges, Principals of schools, Prosecutors, attorneys, Guardian ad Litem, friends/family of victims and other community members.

I help them with the basics to start over. Furniture, clothes, toys, food, appliances, sometimes auto repair shops can fix their cars, and much more. I attend court hearings with them, I've helped them with divorce filings by preparing their divorce/custody filings....all this is FREE for them. I offer my time because I was once a victim.

I left my abusive ex-husband in 2003 with \$5.00 in my pocket, no car, no family here, a part-time teaching job at a Christian Pre-school and an almost 5 year old son. Before leaving, the police never helped, only told me I was a "nagging wife" or he was a "great husband/father because he had a job and nice house". They hid his guns inside our house when they answered 911 calls because he held us at gunpoint or held knives to my throat, or raped me on a weekly basis. One officer told me, "You're making me late for dinner". Not once was he arrested, only send away "for 8 hours to sober up or cool off". At that time there was no mandatory arrest. I finally got the courage to leave him in the middle of the night, again, with no help from police. They actually told him to "disable the car so I could not take it". Then after 2 hours they told me I could take my son and the car and go someplace but "I had to call him to let him know where we were at so he could come get the car". During our 6 year custody battle, he abused me at exchanges, then started abusing our small son. Police refused to get involved only to say "he had a right to punish our small son any way he wanted to". I went through hell! I contacted every SC law maker, Governor Sanford, Attorney General McMaster, our legislators in Washington, wrote to the President of the United States and every national domestic violence organization. I needed help in now stopping the abuse of my son. One officer told my 8 year old son that if he kept telling people his father abuses him then he (my son) would go to jail. I had pictures, a Guardian ad Litem had pictures and the police had pictures.

In the end, I went on my own in 2009 and filed to terminate my ex's parental rights, even after being told by a dozen attorneys it would never happen. I was determined to give my son a good life so I spend hundreds of hours researching and preparing my filing. The day came in court and I was granted the termination. My son was no free from all the physical and psychological abuse. Better news, on the day my son turned 15, the officer who told him he was going to jail, was arrested for actions on other cases. What a terrific present.

I wasn't going to let my ordeal stop me from helping other victims. I started working with the Greenville County Solicitor's Office speaking at their monthly CDV meetings to victims of abuse. In 2012, I saw the need to expand so I approached the Simpsonville, Mauldin and Fountain Inn Police Departments to get this same monthly meeting started with them. Since they're smaller municipalities, all three meet at the Simpsonville Police Department once a month for this same meeting. I also speak at United Way events, area churches, schools and have joined the Solicitor's Office in being their guest speaker at a Police Officer Training. My topic was "How an officer can better respond to a domestic violence call". I don't tell them they're doing their job wrong or how they should do it. I simply tell them what I went through and how they might have been able to help me better. And what I hear from victims on how the officer might have better helped them. I was nervous for this first speaking but I believe 95% of the officers were very receptive and many even talked to me afterwards. I would love to do more of these speakings to better help officers respond. I always tell them, "I realize many calls you respond to aren't new, you've been to that house many times. But you never know when the victim is ready to leave and what you say may be her breaking point". I am by no means a professional speaker but speak from experience which I think victims need to hear. I'm someone who'd lived it, escaped and made a life for my son and myself. I SURVIVED!

I continue to run my organization from home so I can raise my two boys as a single parent (8 and 16 years old). I also spend about 20-25 volunteer hours at my son's school, JL Mann Academy running the school store which I've made profitable even with the government changes. So much so that we got the attention of several news stations and newspapers. I spend about 10 of those hours each week with the Special Needs students helping them with skills they can use once they graduate. By working the school, it gives me all the free time I need for my organization. I have an 8x10 pink utility trailer I use for all donation pick-ups and deliveries. I either pick the items up myself or my kids help me. My garage has been my "storage unit" for years.

The reason I am writing today is in regards to your Domestic Violence Task Force. This is something very near and dear to my heart and I would LOVE to get involved and possibly even be on this wonderful team fighting for a change. You mentioned you wanted advocates and victims involved. What better person than one person who was/is both? The very police department that gave me hassle when I was going through my divorce, the one that had the officer tell my son he was going to jail, the very advocate who represented my ex-husband after I was charged with harassment for me and my son calling 911 when he was being abused.....is the very police department I started the monthly CDV meetings with. Does that not tell you that I would be a great addition to your Task Force? I took something tragic in my life, people who wouldn't help me and turned it into something good, me speaking to victims, offering help and a listening ear.

I would the opportunity to talk to you about this and be welcomed to your committee in helping to make a change.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter.



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