

Dear Ms. Chair and members of the committee,

Thank you for accepting my testimony in support of bill HB23-1108. I am a sexual-assault Survivor who went through the justice process in 2018-2019 within the Second Judicial District in Colorado.

By the time my case came before the Second Judicial District, I had already gone through several months of very high stress and acute PTSD following the assault, police investigation, and search for the serial predator. I did not feel “safe” out in the world yet – both in a physical sense and in a relational sense. And “trust,” in particular, was difficult for me; my nervous system was sensitized, and I easily felt betrayed by those around me. I was still in the beginning stages of healing, and felt vulnerable entering situations that took me outside my comfort zone. This is because being part of the outside world meant having to tolerate the unexpected, and my nervous system had been rewired to interpret the unexpected as a threat. I came to quickly understand why one Survivor in my life had always told me she didn’t like surprises.

Survivors like to know what’s going to happen.

Dealing with the justice system is undeniably overwhelming and at times bewildering. For me it was a process that took more than a year – a whiplash experience that went month-to-month from high-intensity focus on the case to no news at all. In a sense, it’s “all about” the unexpected, especially as someone who had little experience with court procedures. I didn’t understand how it all worked and what to expect; I had never even made it on a jury before. All I knew of court was from TV. However, I wanted to be there for all of the hearings because I desperately wanted justice for myself and for the other victims associated with this predator, I wanted to make sure this dangerous criminal wouldn’t hurt anyone else, and that the defense team knew I was in it for the long haul. That I was present. I was there. But it took a lot of fortitude for me to expose myself in that way, to sit – repeatedly – close to the man who had violated and hurt me in so many ways and made me feel like a stranger to my own self.

One of the most traumatic court experiences I had, which occurred at one of the early hearings, was when the judge in opening the discussion of the case read my full name in court as one of the victims. Nobody prepared me for this, or explained that this would happen. It made me feel so publicly exposed to all of the other people in the courtroom, and I felt revictimized and violated. I experienced a loss of functioning dealing with this betrayal in the early days of healing, when the PTSD was stronger and my resilience low.

In contrast, the most positive experience I had in court was with a judge at the beginning of the sentencing process. I had spent a long time preparing my Victim Impact Statement, and I wanted to make a difference with my words. I wanted the judge to truly understand the profound effect the sexual assault had had on my life, even though the sentence had already been set. I wanted him to understand that not just for me, but for all the other cases that would come before him in the future. And I wanted to feel heard, especially because the case had not gone to trial. He hadn't heard me speak before.

When giving my victim impact statement, I spoke directly to the judge, looking into his eyes for at least 20 minutes as I gave my prepared statement. I was very emotional in the beginning but the judge held my gaze and listened attentively. He was engaged and leaning forward. He didn't make me feel rushed. And afterward, he responded and indicated my statement had a great impact on him. His words were validating, appropriate, trauma-informed, and made me feel like he had truly listened to me.

Even though I had this positive experience, I would still consider my involvement in the justice process to have been incredibly re-traumatizing overall. I think this is important to understand. My experience is not the norm, and if it was still so re-traumatizing for me what is it like for those that have a terrible experience? How much more has their trauma been exacerbated? It is these "terrible" experiences that make the news and circulate within Survivor circles and then become a disincentive for victims of sexual assault and rape to even report in the first place.

Ever since going through the justice process and comparing my experience with anecdotal and news-reported experiences of other Survivors in Colorado and around the country, I have felt passionate about the idea of educating judges about the significant impacts of sexual-assault trauma and how it manifests. Because what judges say and how they behave toward Survivors in court matters and affects – in both a potentially devastating AND potentially positive sense – our day-to-day functioning during the justice period and our overall recovery trajectory afterwards.

The fallout from violent and violating traumas – not just the practical, physical, and primary mental-health effects, but how the world and people around us respond – cumulatively can have a stronger negative effect on us than even the crime itself. So the situation is this: If the justice process is worse than the original crime, then why go through it?

I think if judges had a basic understanding of trauma and made simple changes to how they address people, listen to people, and mindfully manage each case, they could have a profound impact on the

lives of those who cycle through their courtrooms. With a more trauma-informed judicial system, I believe more justice could be served and less trauma created or triggered.

Coming out of the justice process with even 25% less additional trauma could make a huge difference in people's lives. And judges have the potential also to positively affect trauma recovery, something that happened for me as a result of how the judge in my case handled the sentencing hearing. Judges are not meant to be therapists; that is not their job. But simply being trauma-informed can have a notable therapeutic effect, or at least not cause additional harm.

As survivors, a large part of our healing can be advocating for others. We want others to have less pain than we have experienced, to feel some kind of justice, to feel heard and validated, and to feel not as alone.

Because of how the Judge responded to my statement, I felt "heard" and this positively affected certain aspects of my healing process, particularly in the area of "using my voice." The result? Feeling confident writing this testimony for you today.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute this testimony. Please vote Yes on House Bill 1108.

Sincerely,

Dianne Hammer



April 2023

To: Senate Judiciary Committee

Re: AAUW support for HB23-1108—Task Force Victim Awareness and  
Training for Judicial Personnel

Dear Committee Members,

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) is one of the oldest women's organizations in the country, empowering women since 1881. The mission of AAUW is to advance equity for women and girls through research, education and advocacy

Because so many women are victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, AAUW endorses efforts to increase awareness of victims' needs, and to improve the training personnel in the judicial system receive.

We are heartened that HB 1108 will address training related to sexual assault, harassment, stalking and domestic violence. It is especially important that the bill includes trauma and methods to minimize retraumatization of victims and survivors.

For these reasons, AAUW of Colorado strongly supports House Bill 1108 and requests your AYE vote in committee and throughout the process of becoming law.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Su Ryden".

**Su Ryden**  
**AAUW Colorado Public Policy Co-Director**

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*American Association of University Women--AAUW is a top-rated 501(c)3 charitable organization whose mission is to advance gender equity for women and girls through research, education, and advocacy.*