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Testimony before the Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety
of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Hearing: Too Much, Too Long? Domestic Violence in the Workplace

April 17, 2007

I'd like to begin by thanking my family for all the support they've given me throughout my life and during this recovery period since October of 2005. I am very honored to appear here today, and am grateful to Senator Murray and the members and staff of the Senate HELP Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety for inviting me to testify and to submit this written testimony.

I want to begin by pointing out the obvious: what happened to me is extreme, but as the events of recent weeks suggest, it is by no means isolated. In the last month, three women from different parts of the country, one with a state employer, one with a national hotel chain employer, and one with a local business, were murdered in their workplaces by abusive former partners. So although what happened to me is extreme, I am fortunate. I survived to tell the story of what happened to me in hopes that things could be different for other victims. I hope that you will join me in working to ensure that no more women have to die needless and senseless deaths in their workplaces.

Those of you who are familiar with my story know that when the newspapers began covering it, it was not a case of workplace violence. At that stage, in September of 2005, I was seeking to have Judge Richard Palumbo of the Prince Georges County, Maryland District Court keep in place the protection order that I had obtained against my estranged husband in July of the same year. After treating me shamefully, and suggesting that I should obtain marriage counseling (I had made it clear to the judge that my husband was violating the protection order, that I had no interest in reconciling with him, and that I wanted a divorce), Judge Palumbo rescinded my protection order. What happened less than a month later is the reason I am appearing before you today.

In the fall of 2005, I was employed by T-Mobile and was working in a store in Clinton, Maryland. I had notified my employers during that summer of my concerns about my husband and informed them that I had a protective order. They were not supportive; my concerns were not taken seriously. When my then-husband walked in, I was agitated because I had told him to stay away from me. I was actually a short distance from him, and was picking up paper off the printer. I went and sat down, and he approached me and began pouring some sort of liquid from a Sprite bottle on me. Initially, I thought that he was just trying to humiliate me. I threw my hands in the air, trying to protect my face. And I got up and ran to the back of the store. He chased me, and I ran out the back door. He caught me, and stomped on my foot, crushing all the bones in it. I fell to my knees, and that's when I felt this intense heat on my back, and I knew at that point, that I was on fire.

I got up, ran back into the store as fast as I could. I got to the sink. And I took the sprayer off the sink and began spraying my face. I felt my skin, dripping. The flames covered my face entirely so I was just like a great, big ball of fire. From a little below my waist, part on my right leg on up was completely engulfed in flames. So I have burns on my right leg, my behind, stomach, chest area, my back, both arms and my face. I've lost parts of my ears, and my chin was actually melted. My lip was actually melted to my chin. So

there was a lot of damage. I suffered third degree burns over 60% of my body, and my initial hospital stay lasted 92 days, but I am a survivor.

Since October of 2005, I have survived numerous surgeries, and though I still have many more on the horizon, I am recuperating well at home. I am slowly making progress. My main concern is for my family and making sure that I stay strong and focused on moving forward. I am very thankful and appreciative of all the support I have received from everyone. The thoughts, prayers, and donations I have received were and are deeply appreciated by me and my entire family.

I think that employers have a significant role to play in helping victims of domestic and sexual violence obtain and maintain their independence from abusive partners. I will admit that I have found the response of my employer, T Mobile to be at some times frustrating, and at others, depressing. Employers stand to benefit greatly from supporting many of their employee victims. In my three years at T-Mobile I was top sales representative for two years. In many cases there is great value to supporting a good employee. Not only are they productive, and good for the bottom line, employers avoid recruiting and retraining costs when they support the employees they already have.

The Congress took an important first step in acknowledging this when they reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act in December of 2005. One of the new programs that was created is a resource center to help employers learn how to support their employees, and provide them with model policies and other materials. Hopefully, these materials will help employers understand how to respond and support their employees who have protection orders, although that did not happen for me. This resource center is a terrific first step, and I hope that it will receive funding. But more remains to be done, and I hope this Congress will continue to lead the way to ensuring that victims of domestic and sexual violence, regardless of where they live, will enjoy the same level of security with regard to domestic and sexual violence in the workplace.

First of all, no one should be fired from their job just because they are a victim of domestic or sexual violence. This will only cause them to remain dependent on the abuser and mired in a situation that, as far as the victim is concerned, is very likely to deteriorate and to be dangerous for herself and her children.

Second, to the extent that victims need a small amount of time off to work with an advocate to ensure their safety, to change their locks, and/or get a protection order, they should be able to take that needed time, and to know that their jobs are secure and will be waiting for them. Third, if someone has to leave a job because of domestic or sexual violence suffered by themselves or a family member, they should be able to receive unemployment insurance. Each of these three protections is available in some states, but rarely are they all available. I worked for a national company, T Mobile. If I had worked in Washington, DC, unemployment insurance would have been available to me, but because I work in Maryland, it is not. It is not fair that access to such basic protections should depend on where a victim lives. Every victim deserves a high level of protection. Congress should make sure that every victim of domestic or sexual violence, no matter

where she lives, can have the support of her employer for addressing her situation and access to unemployment benefits if she needs to leave a job.

Finally, although I know that this Committee is focused on employment issues, I would like to say a word in support of anti-bullying programs. I am particularly supportive of them and feel that making them widely available in school settings will go far in teaching young men and women how to behave appropriately in intimate relationships. If you teach young people about appropriate behavior early, before they begin to engage in destructive patterns that ultimately lead to violence and abusive behavior, everyone will benefit in the long run. At this point, my medical bills are in excess of \$1 million. Surely an investment in prevention is much better than paying a heavier price later with the involvement of the health care, criminal justice and other systems.

For obvious reasons, I also hope the Congress will also fund and support training for judges so that no one else has to endure the type of treatment that I did at the hands of someone who could have done so much to help me escape the abusive situation in which I found myself. When your colleague in the House, Judge Ted Poe was interviewed about my case he said, “in these types of cases, we know that abusers do not change ... and [that Judge Palumbo] ought to have granted [my request to have the protection order stay in place].” Judge Palumbo’s actions were unconscionable. By improperly rescinding the protective order, Judge Palumbo gave my abuser the courage and confidence to approach me – a decision that, as you know, had disastrous results. But the justice system failed to ensure that similar misconduct does not happen in the future. After public outcry over his actions, Judge Palumbo retired. The Maryland Judicial Disabilities Commission then decided that charges concerning his misconduct should be dropped. Judge Palumbo was permitted to retire with his pension and full state benefits. Judges need to be held responsible for their actions. When justice is not served, all citizens suffer.

Let me close by repeating something that I said earlier: my story is extreme, but I was fortunate enough to survive. Not everyone is so fortunate as we have been reminded recently. But regardless of how severe the issue is – and it could be someone who repeatedly calls the victim on the job, stops by often to check on their whereabouts, or who is constantly e-mailing from their job – workplace violence, and the potential for it is a serious matter. I hope that you will do all in your power to make sure that others do not continue to confront the same obstacles that I did.