



## Written Testimony in Support of SB 615

### Amanda Nguyen

My name is Amanda Nguyen. On the day that I was raped, I never could have imagined that a greater injustice awaited me than the one I had already been forced to endure. As a child, I had learned to believe in the well-worn credos of our legal system—that we all had access to justice, that our civil rights were sacrosanct, and that everyone was equal under law. But in the wake of my assault, I came to understand just how hollow those words can feel to a survivor seeking justice and compassion.

In the course of pursuing my own case, I ran into roadblock after roadblock—and discovered that my path was all too familiar to millions of Americans. Rape kits destroyed before they could be brought forth as evidence. Copies of vital medical records and police reports denied. Shortfalls and irregularities in every state; symptoms of a broken promise that has left far too many survivors—already reeling from one betrayal—feeling powerless, invisible, betrayed for a second time.

I refused to be invisible—so I charted a new path. I rewrote the law, working with members of Congress, to draft a Sexual Assault Survivors' Bill of Rights. The Bill would earn the distinction of being one of the few pieces of legislation passed unanimously by Congress in recent memory. More importantly, it codified a set of basic, comprehensive civil rights for more than 25 million rape survivors across the country.

Though I never imagined the challenges I would face after my assault, nor did I imagine the power, the progress, and the hope that would arise from my ordeal. I created a non-profit called Rise to teach other survivors how to pen their own rights into existence—and to carry our success in Congress out into the fifty states, where most rape cases are adjudicated. To date, our team has worked with local survivors to secure the passage of 41 laws, with more on the way. Because most rape cases are adjudicated in state courts it is necessary for these rights to be passed on to state by state level in the United States. I ask each of you sitting here today to help bring these civil rights to Maryland where survivors need it still. I ask that you understand the incredible movement we have created together and that through our shared common humanity we can make a difference across not only America.

Access to justice is a necessary prerequisite to true peace. Their lives are the invisible war zones that corrode human potential and hold back the promise of a just world. Their powerlessness is our shame., This is a peace that we all - legislator, citizen, advocate from any corner of the globe - can help deliver. We can hold a light up to this darkest corner of human experience, and allow survivors at last to be seen, to be heard, to be believed, to be empowered.

What higher cause could we all serve than to call the world to action to put power back into the hands of rape survivors—people who have been disempowered by horrific acts of violence? The movement I represent here today is one that draws from our core national values: democracy, equality, and, most of all, hope.

Thank you - please vote for Senate Bill 615.

## **Caitlin Ryan**

Dear Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to address you. My name is Caitlin Ryan. I write today as an ally to survivor and as a woman affected by the tremors of sexual violence.

On January 21, 2017, I helped organize the largest single-day mass protest in the history of the United States. The Women's March brought together women and allies from all backgrounds, political persuasions, and religions from all around the world to stand together against misogyny, against violence, and against hatred. For many, the Women's March helped us feel a little less alone. A little less helpless. A little bit stronger.

That same evening as I was dismissing the last group of volunteers, one of the volunteers on my team, a man at least 30 years older than me, forcibly pulled me toward him and kissed me on the lips. I did not consent to or welcome this action. I was visibly uncomfortable and humiliated in front of other volunteers who had looked up to me. Suddenly, after a day of feeling so empowered, I felt alone and so small. My strength was gone.

I'd known this feeling before. I first learned what rape was when I was 11 years old, in the fifth grade. While kicking around a soccer ball after school, my good friend confided in me that on a recent family vacation, she was raped in a hotel room. That feeling of helplessness set in right away—my friend was in pain. And there was nothing I could do to make things right for her.

It was this sinking, powerless feeling I've felt in my stomach every time since then when I've heard from another friend, classmate, or co-worker who has experienced sexual violence and has walked the long, lonely road toward justice.

But I'm here today because I now know I am not helpless. We are not helpless. We can support survivors, starting by breaking down the barriers faced by survivors in the justice system. Today, survivors face immense challenges from a system that re-victimizes them when they seek basic care and justice. Today I urge you to support SB 615. This bill presents an opportunity to improve conditions for survivors like my childhood friend.

Access to justice shouldn't depend on one's zip code, and survivors everywhere deserve basic rights, such as the right to a rape kit at no cost, to be notified of one's rights, and access to a sexual assault counselor. Through this bill (SB 615), you have the opportunity to join statehouses around the country and improve conditions for the 2.07 million survivors of Maryland. Thank you for your time and consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caitlin M Ryan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Caitlin Ryan  
Chief Strategy Officer, Rise

## **Allison H.**

In 2015, I was sexually assaulted by a man I was dating. As I tried to wrap my head around my trauma, I experienced a plethora of conflicting emotions, and though contacting the authorities occurred to me, justice ultimately seemed untenable. I wanted to enlist the prosecutorial support of the justice system, but was silenced by how few basic protections exist for someone like me. I was deeply aware that my case rendered itself as she-said-he-said, and I couldn't imagine pursuing a long road of interrogation and accusation.

On top of everything, I felt shame and guilt for not coming forward. My assailant was free to attack another as I abandoned other potential casualties instead of doing whatever I could to halt future victimization. But I simply could not fathom how legal action would make any difference.

After some time and a lot of healing, I turned my focus towards what I could do to make a difference-ensuring other survivors have their civil rights protected and have a chance to regain agency. As a survivor, I deeply understand that we all deserve the same rights no matter where the crime took place, we all deserve to be active participants in our own future.

After my assault, I had a hard time figuring out what protections I would be afforded and it seemed like reporting my crime was akin to shouting into an empty abyss. Had I known that I would have been able to track my forensic evidence- evidence taken from my body over a period of up to 6 hours, I would have felt like the law was on my side. I would have felt like I could regain some agency over my own future. But a rape kit tracking system was not readily available to me. Survivors are left to navigate a confusing and opaque law enforcement and judicial system on their own -- while at their most vulnerable. Maryland is only one of 19 states that has not yet implement a rape kit tracking system. SB 615 ensures that survivors of sexual assault will have the support of the criminal justice system that I never did. This bill

will provide transparency and agency to more than 2 million survivors in Maryland. Please pass this bill. Thank you.

## **Maradith Morris**

As a sexual assault survivor and a sexual assault nurse examiner, I have witnessed the anguish and betrayal my patients experience when they learn they have no right to their testing information, if their kit is tested at all. This information is not just “forensic evidence,” it is health information. Sexual assault survivors are asked to navigate an unconscionable maze of bureaucratic, medical, and legal regulations while at their most vulnerable -- and they’re asked to do it without an advocate. In fact, they’re asked to do it with the deck stacked against them.

The system should be set up to bring them security and justice, not to bring further pain and trauma. The rights that Rise advocates for are fundamental, and as a survivor I am committed to ensuring that future survivors are empowered by the law, not re-traumatized by a lack of basic rights.

## **Tyrell Walker**

Most of us have been impacted by sexual assault, whether we know it or not. When someone we care about is hurt and traumatized, it affects everyone. The deepest pain is obviously felt by the victim of sexual assault, but the aftermath reverberates outwards much farther than the event itself. Sexual assault is not just a women’s issue; it is a human issue.

When a citizen is a victim of a crime, the criminal justice system is supposed to help them and protect them. I have not witnessed this when it comes to sexual assault survivors. Instead, I have seen a criminal justice system that traumatizes survivors of sexual assault as much, if not more, than the assault itself. Survivors are penalized for their trauma, told conflicting information, forced to relive their attack every time they have to fight for their evidence to be kept, or are left alone to navigate a complicated system with no guidance whatsoever. This is not the country I want America to be. I do not want us to be a country that leaves survivors of assault, victims of a crime, lost, alone, unsupported by the justice system. America can, and must, do better. We need a system that provides basic support and guidance to victims of crimes, and ensure that the criminal justice system is prepared and empowered to execute the law fairly.

A civilization is judged not by the strength of those most powerful, but by how we care for and support those in need. Survivors need these rights. These rights are vital to creating a justice system for all, and will create provisions necessary for a criminal justice system that knows how to properly treat sexual assault survivors.