

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Molly Louison and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of the Children's Advocacy Center of Cumberland County. I am submitting testimony in strong support of LD 765, "An Act to Permit Recordings of Protected Person to be Admissible in Evidence."

I have been a Child Forensic Interviewer for 6 years and opened the Children's Advocacy Center of York County in 2017. I am a certified Forensic Interviewer with advanced training and oversee day-to-day operations and staffing of our center. In that time, I have interviewed over 620 children involved in child abuse investigations. In York County, we have interviewed over 1,000 children.

Forensic Interviewing of children is an evidence-based practice with decades of research behind it. In 2020, the Maine Supreme court held that Forensic Interviewing is an established field with a degree of reliability, allowing it as a topic in expert testimony. *State v. Westgate*, 2020 ME 74. Each Forensic Interviewer in Maine is affiliated with a Child Advocacy Center providing oversight, supervision and consistent opportunities for ongoing training and skill development, as well as statewide peer review.

Forensic Interviewers are highly trained and dedicated to providing the most trauma-informed setting for a child to speak to their experiences. The center they work under is part of a larger 501c(3) nonprofit, creating a level of neutrality that supports the legitimacy of the process. We believe that these are truly the best quality fact-finding interviews that can be done of children, and we as forensic interviewers work tirelessly to hone our craft, improve our skills, and stay up to date on the latest research and techniques. Despite this effort, very few of the families we see ever see their cases move forward to prosecution. Many children we have seen make full and detailed disclosures of their experiences and still their cases do not move forward.

A major barrier we hear from families is the fear of testimony for young children. In 2021, 57% of the children interviewed at Maine's child advocacy centers were under the age of 12 years old. Of those, 23% were under 6 years old. The youngest child I have seen prepared to testify was 7 years old. In the child-friendly space of the CAC, we spend time building rapport and establishing comfort for children. We find, and research tells us, that this is more conducive to children honestly describing their experiences than in other settings. As forensic interviewers, our job is to hear directly from the child, allow them space to speak, and encourage as much detail as possible for investigators to then assess their cases.

I strongly believe that the forensic interview often contains the most detailed statement from the child, making it invaluable evidence for the jury. Being apart from investigative agencies, we want what is best for the entire process and for all involved. This bill ensures the quality of our interviews by outlining exactly what training and qualifications are needed for the interview to be admitted, ensuring that the defendant's rights are also protected.

I look forward to answering any of this committee's questions and ensuring we at Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers support your work to improve the criminal justice system in Maine.