

March 27, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Keri Kapaldo and I am here today in support of **LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.**

I am submitting testimony today on behalf of myself as a forensic nurse and the St. Joseph Hospital Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner (SJB SAFE) Program. The SJB SAFE Program provides trauma-informed medical-forensic care for all victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, human trafficking, child abuse/neglect, and dependent adult abuse/neglect. This bill is of particular importance to the SJB SAFE program as we do not operate in a silo when caring for sexual assault victims. Best practice outcomes for our patients heavily rely on the presence of a sexual assault advocate not only during an accompaniment but also as a resource outside the hospital for support while a survivor navigates their healing holistically.

In 2022, the SJB SAFE Program cared for 88 acute sexual assault patients, a 63% increase from 2021, resulting in over 320 advocate hours just for hospital accompaniment in our small community hospital. Furthering our response, we consulted with 64 additional patients who disclosed acute or historical sexual assault resulting in referrals to sexual assault advocacy agencies and/or direct support at the time of care, a 156% increase from 2021. That's 152 times a survivor heard "I believe you" and "I'm here for you" from an advocate. That's 80+ times an advocate traveled to our hospital, no matter time of day or night, to be at the side of a person who needed them most.

I've been a forensic nurse for over nine years, that's a lot of sexual assault patients I've cared for with an advocate at my side. When I reflect on this I think about times when we sat in a chapel together because that's where a survivor felt most comfortable. I think about when an advocate ran to McDonald's at 1am because that's the only food the survivor wanted in that moment. I think about times when they worked day and night to find safe shelter for someone being trafficked. I think about the times they've colored and played games for hours on the floor of the ER with a pediatric patient. When I think about the impact an advocate has had I think of the tiny, seemingly insignificant acts that add up to big hugs, smiles, and a glimmer of hope in the survivor.

I always tell my patients: "I can do a lot for you in these four walls, but once you're discharged, I'm limited. Advocacy, that's for life. They're there at 3am when you can't sleep, for a cup of coffee and a chat, or a familiar face during a stressful time." Advocates are just there for people. Unapologetically, there.

Thank you for your consideration. We hope you will support LD 566 and I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

Sincerely,
Keri Kapaldo, BSN, RN, SANE-A, ME-SAFE-A/P