

March 6, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Abby Leibowitz. I am a resident of Biddeford and am submitting testimony on behalf of Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine (SARSSM).

I am submitting testimony in support of LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

My job at SARSSM is as a Forensic Interviewing Coordinator within the Children's Advocacy Center Program. I have wanted to be a forensic interviewer since I was in college and learned what a Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) does. The CAC model is meant to be a trauma-informed, neutral way for kids to talk about alleged sexual assault to one person, one time. A forensic interviewer is trained in how to gather facts from children ages 3-18 in a non-leading, non-suggestive, developmentally appropriate way while members of law enforcement, Child Protective Services, and/or prosecution observe from a separate room.

I started my career at SARSSM after graduating college in 2018 as a Family Advocate - getting to know the ins and outs of a CAC before becoming an interviewer, which was my ultimate goal. About a year later I had the opportunity to move into the Forensic Interviewer role, requiring a 40 hour training in forensic interviewing protocols. The field of forensic interviewing is very research-based and requires consistent feedback from peers to maintain skills and best practice. I have attended multiple Advanced Forensic Interviewer trainings, have been trained in multiple protocols, and have completed specialty courses such as interviewing individuals with disabilities, children involved in trafficking, and children involved in online exploitation. In addition, I keep up with new research being published, attend relevant webinars, and am a part of multiple peer reviews with other interviewers throughout the state and country. In 2021 I was elevated to the position of Forensic Interview Coordinator which involves helping to onboard new interviewers, making sure their training is appropriate and up to date, and choosing the appropriate interviewer for new referrals.

Having a job in the field of sexual assault, and more specifically, child sexual abuse, is rewarding but is not always easy. I love being a person who children can feel comfortable opening up and sharing their story with, but there are good days and

bad days. Because my current salary makes it hard to pay my bills, student loans, and daily expenses, it can be difficult to justify staying in this work long-term. The terms vicarious trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue come to mind when I have had a long week of interviews, or negative interactions with families or team members. I do use a counselor to decompress from these feelings, another expense in my life related to my work. I love my job and couldn't see myself being fulfilled doing anything else. However, to be paid so little for what I do makes me feel under-valued as a specialist in my field.

I have wanted to do this work for years and it makes me incredibly proud that I've gotten to where I am from when I started in 2018. However, I have considered leaving this dream job for one I would not be as happy with, but where I would make a more livable income. I believe I am an asset to my team and have done a vast amount of professional development and continuing education to become the best forensic interviewer I can be. I think it would be detrimental to this center if I were to leave my position, but in terms of budgeting and long-term life planning it does not feel feasible with the income trajectory I'm on. Your support for LD 566 would mean the world to myself and others working in Sexual Assault Centers across the state. I want to thank you for your time in reading through my testimony and would implore you to vote in favor of the bill.

Sincerely,

Abby Leibowitz