

March 8, 2023

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

My name is Amie Dick and I am a resident of Bath.

I am submitting testimony in support of LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services. I am the Program Coordinator and Forensic Interviewer for the Midcoast Children's Advocacy Center, a program of Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM).

As a Forensic Interviewer, I follow an evidenced-based, structured protocol to interview children in a trauma-informed way when there are suspicions of child sexual abuse. I have foundational training, training in advanced topics, mentorship with national experts, and attend peer reviews regularly to receive feedback on my forensic interviews. There are interview structure adaptations I am able to make as an experienced interviewer, that an interviewer with less experience does not have the training for. As I am conducting forensic interviews, I need to be able to think about several things all at once: adapting to the child's development, barriers to disclosing, and trauma responses; what the different investigators watching the interview need to continue their investigation; and what question types are non-leading and legally defensible.

The foundation of CACs is in our multi-disciplinary team, as we know that no one agency or profession can provide a family with all the knowledge and resources necessary for justice and healing. We partner and work with our multi-disciplinary team members in law enforcement, DHHS, the DA's office, mental health, and medical fields – but it also takes time to build those relationships. In the less than 5 years that our CAC has been open, I am the 3rd program coordinator. When I first started three years ago, it was easy to see distrust and fractured relationships due to our high turnover. While our team is faring better than ever, relationship building on a multi-disciplinary team is a long-term process that takes building a foundation and having a commitment to those relationships.

It has been an honor to serve families by providing over 350 Forensic Interviews of children in my Midcoast community. There are many, many children I will never see again, but will never forget. Their narratives and strength stay with me always, and they deserve so much more. I am thankful for the appreciation I receive from the community for our program's work. It shows how much the work is needed. But currently, the wages are not sustainable. When we rely on those who do the work because "they have good hearts and don't care about the pay," it means we rely on those who can afford to do the work. This does not reflect the demographics and experiences of those in the Midcoast.

As a person in my 30s, I have very reasonable goals. I hope to buy a house, save enough for retirement, and create a stable home for a family. Doing all three of these is not achievable with my current salary. A restart date for student loan payments is looming, and I am so conflicted about my ability to stay at SASSMM while paying on loans for my Master in Social Work. My greatest fear currently is that something happens to my paid-off car and I gain a car payment – something that simple would be enough for me to need to leave and find higher paying work.

I hope you understand how difficult it is for advocates to advocate for themselves. I would be remiss if I didn't talk about my colleagues across the state. Those who have been doing this work for a long time deserve to have their expertise and commitment acknowledged, praised, and compensated. Those who are new to the field and hoping they can build a career in something they feel passionate about need to see that it is possible to do so.

Please vote in support of LD 566. Thank you for your time.