

27<sup>th</sup> March, 2023

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

My name is Sam Saucier and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine in support of LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

I have worked as an educator and an advocate with SASSMM for the last two and a half years. My work as an advocate includes supporting people affected by sexual violence including callers to the Statewide Sexual Assault Helpline, and also in community settings such as schools. My small team of educators provides sexual violence prevention programming to students and community members throughout the Midcoast. Last year alone, we provided these programs to over 7,500 people.

This work is hard. It will never be easy to engage with the topic of sexual violence day in and day out. In my time here, I have watched my colleagues suffer the burnout that accompanies secondary trauma exposure. I have also witnessed these symptoms in myself: this work has undeniably taken its toll on my physical and mental health. I have spent considerable funds to address these health issues so that I may continue doing my job.

It is an honor to do this work; to help people through the most difficult periods of their lives and to labor, endlessly, against the ideas, systems, and behaviors that enable sexual violence to continue. It is what keeps me in this work. But it would be unreasonable to expect that I, or any of my fellow advocates across the state, should be able to continue doing this without a fair wage.

Low pay creates high turnover and a lack of access to resources for advocates who are regularly exposed to the unyielding traumas facing our communities. Advocates need financial access to mental health support including therapy. The constant fluctuation of staff makes it near impossible to offer consistent services, let alone begin to expand them and work toward our agency's mission of ending sexual violence. It is imperative that we attract dedicated, experienced people who can stay in the work longer because they have the stability that adequate compensation provides. It is clear that compensating advocates appropriately leads to an improvement in the quality of services we are able provide to the community.

I ask that you vote in favor of LD 566 in support of advocates and in support of our communities. Thank you for your time.