

Dear Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Committee,

My name is Rebecca Cornell du Houx and I am here to testify in support of LD 566 An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services. I am the Executive Director of the Sisters in Arms Center in Augusta, ME, which serves women veterans and their children through housing stability, peer support and groups for survivors of military sexual trauma (MST), life coaching through wellness plans, and basic necessities.

The need for our services is evident. Women veterans continue to be one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. While veteran homelessness between 2009-2019 has seen a significant reduction, there has been a drastic increase in homelessness among women veterans. Rates of women veteran homelessness, during the same period, increased by 135%. Further, veterans experiencing military sexual trauma are twice as likely to experience homelessness than their counterparts. Not surprisingly, women veterans who experience military sexual trauma are also twice as likely to follow through with suicide than other women veterans who have no history of MST.

Specific to housing stability, since reopening our doors post-covid for transitional housing services, we have provided safe housing to 12 women veterans, and since our initial establishment in 2015, 52 women veterans (not including children) have sought security through our doors. During COVID, we still supported women veterans through running online support groups and developing a peer network for all genders who are survivors of military sexual trauma (MST).

Although we are proud of our hard work to support veterans, we still have a long way to go. This past year alone, we unfortunately did not have the available volunteers to provide housing services to 14 women veterans. It is incredibly difficult and disheartening to let a fellow sister in arms know that we don't have the infrastructure to add another resident, despite numerous volunteer hours that are being poured into the organization from the community and throughout the state. The majority of our volunteers, including myself, are either currently serving or former members of the military. Our current volunteer center coordinator, who is a combat veteran, provided 350 hours of in person volunteer time at the center, in a period of just under 7 months.

In order to operate at our most optimal level and ensure next year those 14 women have a safe place to stay, and to expand our group and peer services to survivors, and strengthen our infrastructure to apply for additional funding, we need to hire a center coordinator who is available to support every women veteran and sexual trauma survivor who calls us during one of their most difficult times of their lives. We will continue to spend countless hours volunteering for our survivors and service members, but with your help our reach expands outwards to bring safety and support to an exponential number survivors who served our country.

Much gratitude extended to Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyers and the committee for your dedication to service and taking the time to listen to the needs of survivors.

With Gratitude and Respect,

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Works Cited

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