

Testimony of Elise Johansen

In Support of L.D. 1964

“An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission  
to Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program”  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and the distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Elise Johansen, and I am writing on behalf of Safe Voices\* in support of L.D. 1964.

Enacting this proposal will help make Maine a safer place for all. Creating public policy that enhances support for survivors of domestic violence, the majority of whom are women and mothers, is a crucial way to have immediate positive impact on the lives of so many Mainers including tens of thousands of Maine children. By providing access to paid safe leave under this legislation, survivors of domestic violence will be able to access pay for time off needed that is directly related to their need for safety. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs asserts that without safety, the ability to thrive or even survive is severely reduced.

In addition to many other tactics of abuse such as physical violence and isolation, many survivors experience economic abuse by an abusive partner. Survivors are often not permitted to access household bank accounts, obtain, or maintain a job, attend school, own a car, or own property or have their name listed on a lease. Some even have their credit destroyed by the abuser thereby reducing their financial resources or safety nets. Survivors' access to financial support and resources is already limited due to the common tactics of economic abuse and isolation from natural supports. For so many Mainers, taking time off work to attend to any needs relating to their victimization means days without pay. And not earning money means loss of basic needs. So many Mainers live paycheck to paycheck so missing a few hours of work can make the difference between a survivor being able to afford gas for their car, food for their children, or covering the costs of their medication and perhaps even having to face eviction.

These truths mean that a survivor's safety is significantly complicated by the very real financial constraints that taking time off work creates. During the moments of seeking safety, or fleeing from an abuser, the way forward is confusing, arduous and the risk of them being harmed by the abuser increases drastically. These realities, coupled with the real danger of having to take time off work without pay for someone who is already experiencing hardships is enough for them to not proceed with the necessary steps to seek safety.

The advocates at Safe Voices work with over 2,000 survivors each year, and we hear from the majority of survivors that because of the domestic abuse, coupled with the violence and fear, they

are experiencing significant food insecurity, housing instability, and lack of connections to natural supports which all impacts their ability to be safe.

This legislation will remove the barrier survivors have currently when employers are not able to access a family leave benefit that would allow for survivors to receive paid time off to be able to attend court, meet with an advocate or attorney to file for a Protection from Abuse, provide evidence to a detective, allow for time to flee to a shelter, or pack up and move, or simply be able to wait at home for a handy person to come and change the locks, or even go to the hospital for their injuries from an assault.

The work in supporting survivors of domestic violence and their children requires many systems, sectors, and stakeholders to do their part, and this bill will dovetail seamlessly with other protections in Maine. It will allow survivors to have one less thing to worry about in the midst of seeking safety or rebuilding their lives.

\*Safe Voices is the domestic violence and human trafficking resource center serving Androscoggin, Franklin and Oxford Counties in Maine.