

January 23, 2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Nicole Watkins and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Services, the sexual assault agency that serves Oxford, Androscoggin and Franklin counties.

I am submitting testimony in support of LD 2084, an Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

I have been with the agency for more than five years and during that time, have interacted with hundreds of survivors seeking support for themselves, their children, family members, or friends. I provide crisis intervention and ongoing support services, including accompaniments to support survivors during forensic medical procedures, law enforcement interviews and court proceedings, both civil and criminal.

I would like to present you with two different scenarios.

Just imagine.. Your niece shares with you that she was inappropriately touched by a friend of the family. You contact your local police department and they ask you to bring her in for an interview. She's seven years old. She is brought into a room with a dim florescent light, posters of sex offenders plastered on the wall, and is asked to tell a middle aged man in uniform about what brought her in today. She's scared. She is in second grade and suddenly thrown into an environment that no seven year old should have to see. She makes no disclosures of sexual abuse. She leaves the police department crying and afraid of the police officer who she felt didn't believe her.

Now. Imagine a space where your niece is met with welcoming faces, colorfully-painted walls, and toys, games and activities to enjoy. She is given a tour of the space where she will meet with an individual who has training in trauma-informed care while her parents are given resources about sexual assault medical aftercare, counseling referrals, and information about behaviors they might see in their daughter moving forward.

These differences continue within other systems that families interact with. A parent files for a protection from abuse order, is granted a temporary order from the judge on behalf of their child and is given a final hearing date. Now what? Without funding for sexual assault support services, families are alone to face obstacles that they know nothing about. The family is already

experiencing difficult and complicated emotions following their child's disclosure and now must figure out the rules of complicated systems they've never faced before, on their own.

With funding through LD 2084, however, individuals are provided with support throughout the entirety of the case. Someone works with them to support and guide them through the complex legal processes. An advocate provides referrals to Pine Tree Legal, interacts with law enforcement agencies, and communicates with the district attorney's office on behalf of the survivor while they begin their journey towards healing. The difference between having those supports and a world without them is a stark one, and I know which I'd choose for my family and my community – and I hope you make that choice as well.

I thank you for your time and ask for you to vote in favor of LD 2084.

Thank you,

Nicole Watkins

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Sexual Assault Response Team Coordinator for Oxford County

Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Services