

January 23, 2024

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

My name is Julia Miller and I am a resident of Hampden. I am submitting testimony in support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

I have done advocacy work in some form for over 10 years both within tribal communities and in the public sector. Presently, I am a Program Director and oversee Sexual Assault Services (SAS) and two Children's Advocacy Centers (CAC). SAS provides support to victims/survivors and affected others through a 24/7 helpline, accompaniment to medical, court and law enforcement agencies as well as prevention education services and community outreach to a variety of settings and ages. These services are critical to victims and their families as well as professionals in that advocates engage in supporting the emotional wellbeing of the victim while the other services engaged can tend to their professional focus.

Advocates are informed on laws and resources pertaining to sexual assault.

Advocates also are skilled in active listening, self-care, and calming methods, with a motto of "begin by believing" which provides a safe space free of judgement for victims. Providing that safe space is one of the most important services advocates do - because sexual assault without physical evidence is difficult to prove, leaving the victim often without justice. Advocates cannot provide justice, but we can provide safe space for victims to feel heard and validated.

CAC's provide a trauma informed, evidence based practice for children and their families, in concert with the multidisciplinary teams involved in cases of alleged sexual assault of a child, that reduces the impact of harm on the child(ren) by having a qualified forensic interview that can be introduced in court. By having one interview with a multidisciplinary team, a child is not exposed to the harm and trauma of retelling of facts multiple times outside of court.

At the onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, we had 10 sexual assault advocates, two supervisors, and four full time staff for two CAC's. Since then and with the changes in the economy and work force, we are down to six advocates and one supervisor for sexual assault services and two full time and two 2/5th positions for the CAC's. Last year when the bill that would have provided funding for higher advocate wages did not pass, we had a mass exit of advocates who left to take jobs with higher pay. We currently have to rely on other Sexual Assault Centers to assist

us with coverage for our 24/7 helpline service. We have had to decrease our prevention education efforts and outreach due to lack of staff. This has great impact on our ability to provide education in schools and participate in tabling events to spread awareness about sexual violence.

All this is said to ask you that considerations be made to prioritize funding for sexual assault services across the State - to not only keep current services intact but to increase funding to make services whole. Funding LD 2084 would be a start towards showing your commitment to these critical services.

Respectfully,

Julia Miller