

January 23, 2024

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

My name is Emily Jaye, and I am a resident of Bangor, Maine. I am a sexual assault advocate with Rape Response Services, a sexual assault support center that serves Penobscot and Piscataquis counties. I am submitting testimony in support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

The criminal and civil justice systems can be complex and intimidating for victims of crime to navigate alone. Sexual assault advocates provide a source of consistency and comfort through the process. We help survivors fill out paperwork, and walk into the court room with them, so they never have to face their perpetrator alone. In the days before, we connect them to legal services and give pep talks. In the days following, we let them know we are proud of them, and make sure their questions are answered. We connect them to counseling and to support groups so they can begin to heal. It is not an exaggeration to say that these services are life-changing and life-saving.

My greatest joys as an advocate have come from watching survivors and their loved ones heal after a traumatic event and being able to stand alongside them on that journey. Court advocacy is just one piece of that support. I am grateful to be able to answer those late-night calls on the helpline, or to be able to support a family in the Penquis Children's Advocacy Center. When I can connect a survivor of sex trafficking to MECASA's emergency fund, so they can meet their most basic needs, the relief in their voice is tangible. These are just a few ways that we support survivors. These things are what make advocacy such deeply rewarding and essential work.

We also could not do this work without the expertise and support of other systems. Domestic violence advocates, Pine Tree Legal Assistance lawyers, victim witness advocates, and countless others are vital pieces of a survivor's support network – and VOCA funding pays for much of that support as well. Without these community partners, the number of supports survivors currently have would be greatly diminished at a time when resources are already spread thin.

VOCA funding is the backbone of much of our work as advocates. If this funding is cut, it will dramatically reduce services that are essential for survivors. A cut of over 60% would mean no more survivors of sex trafficking accessing the emergency fund and potentially the end of 24/7 support on our helpline. It would mean countless Mainers experiencing violence would lose their lifeline to safety, justice, and healing. It would mean that in a time when more and more people are scared and reaching out for help, fewer and fewer would receive the help they so desperately need.

I thank you for your time and consideration, and I urge you vote in support of LD 2084.