

January 23, 2024

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

My name is Shawna Austin and I am the Associate Director of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services (SAPARS). I am submitting testimony in support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

SAPARS provides critical support services for people who have experienced sexual violence in Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties and the towns of Bridgton and Harrison. We are also the umbrella agency for the Children's Advocacy Center of Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties. If we were to see a 60% cut in VOCA funding we would need to lay off almost half of our staff and it would devastate our programming. We would no longer be able to provide the critical and comprehensive support services in our communities.

This would impact survivors, the community and concerned others by drastically reducing access to our free and confidential support services. Below please find words from a survivor that has been given to us to share.

“I have been fortunate enough to be a recipient of SAPARS' services. Their compassionate support and guidance have been life-changing. They understand how sexual abuse, at its deepest levels, affects every aspect of a person's life, and they delve expertly into very specific and very insightful guidance. I think this is rare, and I am stunned to think how far I've come! I'm grateful for their ongoing support.

Although SAPARS wasn't around when I was in school, it warms my heart to think of them being available to students these days. I also never needed their services in court, but I can imagine how valuable their support is to anyone in that position. I know they're involved with other projects and outreach too, and they work with other agencies statewide and at the local level to accomplish their mission of preventing and eliminating sexual abuse and helping anyone who has been affected. SAPARS is a godsend to our community.”

We urge you and your colleagues to support LD 2084 so that we can continue to provide the high quality, comprehensive support services to people in our communities who have experienced interpersonal violence.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Shawna Austin