

January 23, 2024

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

My name is Colleen Walker and I am a resident of Brewer, Maine and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Rape Response Services.

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

I have been a Sexual Assault Center Advocate for over 4 years and I am very concerned with how funding cuts of this magnitude would impact the vulnerable populations we serve. Victims and survivors of violent crimes often need support in order to face their abusers, navigate complicated systems, manage the radiating impact of this violence in their lives, and find healing. Advocates hear over and over “I couldn’t have done this without you”, which is both an honor and also, we know, just the plain truth. The courage it takes for a person to stand in a court room and face someone who violently attacked them is indescribable. I cannot fathom if funding was cut and suddenly there was no advocate available to support them. Would they have to face their abuser alone?

We work with people who very nearly did not walk away from their assault. We work with young people who aren’t sure what to do next to care for themselves, let alone navigate the legal system. We work with children who have never known safety. Our work involves emotional support, being a familiar face that shows up with kindness and ferocity in our hearts on their behalf. We provide information about what options they have when engaging with systems, provide much needed referrals to Pine Tree Legal, walk them through forms and funding options. We hold shaking hands. We celebrate unseen victories.

Very often our community partners are taxed by high numbers of clients as well, which adds to my concerns about the impact for victims if these cuts happen. Survivors could be anyone: your daughter, son, spouse, mother, aunt, grandmother, sibling, coworker, neighbor. Sexual violence reaches every demographic, every community, every part of our society. And while you may be able to think of someone in your life who you could count on for support in a terrible situation, many Mainers simply do not have such a person in their lives. We see people who have had to cut ties with their entire family for their own safety and wellbeing. We see people who live in very rural areas and perhaps have one close friend they trust, but they can’t miss work or find a babysitter.

Every story you will hear from advocates is unique but they all share this: violence is *devastating* in every way we can measure, far more common than it should be, and those most likely to experience violence are those who are most likely to lose everything because of it, most likely to struggle within a system that rarely works as intended for them and most likely to do so with the fewest organic supports. We need to be able to show up for survivors in their darkest hour. No one should ever have to walk this road this alone.

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