

23 January 2024

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

My name is Jodi Leach, I am a resident of Blue Hill and a Sexual Assault Client Services Advocate/SART Coordinator. I am submitting educational testimony for LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

I have been a sexual assault advocate since completing the Help in Healing Advocate Training in October of 1999. I have stayed in this work as it has my heart – AND because I have a family that has financially ‘picked up the slack’ so I can continue to support the most vulnerable in our communities.

Advocates work 40 hour weeks and then must also dedicate up to two to three 24-hour shifts to cover our 24/7 helpline. Our day often doesn’t end at 5 pm - we walk out the door and are still hypervigilant with our phone. Being on-call can often double our time (hours and hours of our lives and time with our families) dedicated to sexual assault services every week.

It impacts what we can do and where we can go after hours, weekends, and holidays.

I have left a cart of groceries to go sit in my car and listen as someone pours out their heart about abuse that happened 2 hours ago or 20 years ago. I’ve been called out in the middle of the night to drive more than 2 hours away to support someone for hours and hours while they go through a forensic exam after experiencing sexual violence. In one not unusual week, I had 23 client interactions between Monday and Saturday – ranging from a DHHS team meeting, a face-to-face conversation with a college student, talking to a therapist about available resources for a child whose parent was recently in the news for child pornography charges, to multiple helpline calls supporting survivors.

Those I have supported over the years have ranged in age from under 2 years old up to age 88 – survivors working through feelings like hurt, anger, guilt, shame, terror, embarrassment, and numbness. I have one client, abused by her father at 14 years old, who waited 7 years with her life on hold, for ‘justice’ through the judicial system - at the age of 21.

I support individuals in our local jail that are there for substance use crimes – whose experiences of childhood sexual abuse are at the core of why they began using in the first place. Most have never had anyone they could share their horrendous experiences with, at the time or since, so they could HEAL from the trauma. They deserve to heal.

If these funding cuts happen, survivors will suffer. Victims of terrible crimes will have no one to turn to in their darkest time. Advocates have been with **your** family, friends, and community members at their lowest, most vulnerable moments. This work is difficult, underappreciated, and under compensated, but also **the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my life.**

I have witnessed so much healing and thriving from survivors over the years – and I’m proud to know I had some part in that process. I’m often asked how I could do what I do for so many years. The real question is: How could I not? Advocates like myself see firsthand how vital this work is – and we know what the impacts will be if the work stops being available.

I want to thank the committee for taking the time to hear my voice and allowing me the opportunity to educate you on the work we do in your communities. Please support and fund LD 2084.