

Testimony in support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
1/23/2024

January 18, 2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and distinguished members of the judiciary committee:

My name is Shanon Fitzpatrick, and I am writing to you on behalf of Next Step Domestic Violence Project and in support of LD 2084 and the need for funding to maintain essential victim services in Hancock and Washington County Maine.

For the last year, I have worked as a volunteer on the Next Step helpline, typically responding to nighttime calls. Again and again, I have encountered callers—mainly, though not exclusively, women—who have relied on Next Step and the services it provides to safely navigate the dangers of domestic violence and its destabilizing impacts on individuals, families, and society.

One major area of concern for callers is housing. When an abuser is an intimate partner who lives in one's own home, it can seem impossible to find a way to keep oneself safe. Is it better to stay and suffer further abuse, or leave but have nowhere to go? What about if there are children involved? What if an abuser controls, as they often do, access to all financial resources? More times than I can count, I have seen Next Step help victims of abuse find alternative living quarters, including at the organization's own shelter, where they can go to remove themselves from abusive situations and find time and space to figure out their next moves. In other cases, Next Step provides support for obtaining protective orders that can remove abusers from the home or vicinity of those they have harmed. In such cases, survivors who otherwise might have become unhoused due to domestic violence are able to remain safely in their own domiciles. This is especially crucial when it allows children to continue their education interrupted, or for adults to maintain their current employment, medical care routines, and/or other local support systems.

As the example of housing attests, the presence of domestic violence can be imbricated with, or lead to a cascade of, other challenges, requiring survivors to navigate complex systems at a time when they might be least physically, financially, or psychologically equipped to do so. Next Step's multi-nodal approach to advocacy recognizes this and provides support for survivors navigating legal and social systems. Numerous callers have told me about the ways Next Step provided them with expert legal representation or compassionate court advocacy services when they sought orders related to child custody or personal protection from abuse. It seems to me that this increases the accessibility of an opaque domain that may otherwise feel inaccessible to those who deserve legal attention and redress. Next Step advocates also help survivors interact with Child Protective Services, both by helping people make reports to the state about child endangerment stemming from domestic violence and by running a support group for parents and families experiencing involvement with this system. I have personally talked to callers who, thanks to Next Step, were able to either create safer homes for their children or have them placed with a nearby family member while they received other supportive services.

Next Step offers all these services with an already limited budget, which it stretches considerably through providing extensive training and support for volunteers, such as myself. If its services were reduced or cut, I believe that this would cause irreparable harm for people who are already being

victimized by domestic violence and its reverberating destructive and destabilizing impacts. Survivor-focused advocacy organizations such as Next Step provide an essential link between housing, legal, and social services while making access to these services feel possible for those who, because they are facing insidious and persistent forms of coercive control and abuse, might otherwise be unable to safely access them. Any breaking-down of this link could only further marginalize survivors, exacerbate current crises in homelessness, and impede equal access to justice for those most disproportionately impacted by the dangers of domestic violence.

Sincerely,

Shanon Fitzpatrick, Ph.D.

Next Step Hotline Volunteer