

January 19, 2024

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

My name is Melissa Doyle and I am a resident of Brunswick. I am submitting testimony as both a resident and on behalf of Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM), the Sexual Assault Center supporting residents of Waldo, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, and Eastern Cumberland counties.

My testimony is in support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

As the Associate Director at SASSMM and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, I can attest to the powerful impact that sexual assault services provide to members of these communities and across the state. The critical support we offer survivors starts with our youngest citizens – in both our prevention work in schools and in our Child Advocacy Centers (CAC), where we provide forensic interviews for children who have experienced sexual abuse and assault in a safe, trauma-informed setting. This service offers child-centered space that supports the work of law enforcement and child protective services. If a VOCA fix is not enacted, our Children's Advocacy Center will likely shut its doors given that VOCA and ARPA funding will both end in September of 2024. Children, families, DHHS, and law enforcement will lose access to this critical resource. In 2023, that would have meant that 134 children would not have received these services. In addition to forensic interviews, our family advocates provide care, resources, and referrals for non-offending caregivers. At a time when our child protection system is overwhelmed, removing this critical service puts Maine children and families at further risk.

While VOCA funding allows SASSMM to support individual survivors (over 600 unique survivors in 2023) it also, critically, supports partnerships with a wide range of service providers in criminal justice, law enforcement, the community, and health care to provide comprehensive and holistic healing. Our advocates are able to be in courtrooms, jails and prisons, Emergency Departments, in classrooms, and in the community. We are able to coordinate responses for human trafficking survivors, child survivors of commercial sexual exploitation, young people who have experienced abuse, elders who have been sexually assaulted, and those with disabilities who have been victimized. We cannot do this work alone – we work closely with culturally specific community partners, such as Immigrant Resource Center of Maine, hunger prevention programs such as Midcoast Hunger Prevention Program, domestic violence partners such as New Hope, legal services such as Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Victim Witness Advocates, mental health partners such as Maine Behavioral Health, medical providers such as our SAFE nurses and at Oasis Free clinics, anti-trafficking services such as Preble Street Anti-Trafficking Services, food banks such as Bath Food Bank, schools, law enforcement and many others. Removing funding for sexual assault services not only affects individual survivors but removes the critical opportunity for coordination among partners.

I want to thank the committee for the work you have already done to support survivors and strongly urge you to vote in favor of this bill so that individuals, families, and communities have the opportunity to engage with services where they are listened to, supported, and believed.

With gratitude,

Melissa Doyle, LCSW