

Testimony of Susan Giambalvo  
In Support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary  
January 23, 2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Susan Giambalvo, and I am writing on behalf of Caring Unlimited, York County's Domestic Violence Resource Center, in support of LD 2084 and the need for funding to maintain essential victim services in Maine.

I come to you in a moment of crisis. The looming cuts to VOCA funding will decimate victim services in Maine. In York County, victims of domestic violence and other crimes rely on Caring Unlimited and our VOCA funded community partners to connect them to supports needed to find safety, stability, and justice. In the wake of surviving a life altering, dehumanizing crime, these funds and the services they support are critical.

Historically, VOCA funds account for \$505,000 of the funds that CU receives from the state for its core victim services or about 20% of our regular operating budget. The 60% cut will leave us with just \$202,000 in VOCA funding, a difference of \$300,000 a year.

Caring Unlimited already seeks competitive federal, state and local grant awards, solicits donations, and fundraises in our community to fully fund our work and meet the expectations in our state contract. There are simply no other sources of funds that can make up this devastating loss.

What will a \$300,000 reduction mean to York County? This loss equates to three to four full-time staff positions at our agency. We will be forced to make painful choices to cut program areas that survivors rely on for safety and assistance- services that help survivors increase their safety, build resources and create options to separate from an abuser without further harm. These cuts will disproportionately impact non-residential services that combined reach 1800 people per year. The effect of these cuts will, in practice, equate to shuttering one of these programs completely.

- Now, Caring Unlimited's **24-hour helpline** operates around the clock- 7 days a week, 365 days a year answering 1500 calls for help each year. When a person is finally safe or brave enough to call for help because of the abuse they are experiencing, a trained advocate responds immediately with safety planning and connection to resources. The loss of these funds will force us to reduce the operating hours for this life-changing service. **With these cuts we will no longer be able to answer phones in the middle of the night or on weekends when a victim may finally find a moment of privacy and safety to call.**
- Today, our **Outreach Program** works closely with survivors to craft extensive individualized safety plans. These skilled advocates routinely connect survivors with critical resources through ongoing safety planning including paying for security cameras, changing home locks, or replacing a phone after theirs has been smashed by an abuser. All of these safety measures allow survivors

and their children to remain safely in their home instead of entering a shelter. **A loss of funding will mean we are unable to help anyone but the most high-risk individuals with safety planning, ultimately putting a significant number of people in our community in greater danger with fewer options.**

- Our **Legal Assistance for Victims Program** is an essential part of the civil justice system in York County. CU's advocates are present at court to assist with filing an order of Protection from Abuse, preparing for a hearing to extend a protective order, or navigating complicated legal processes including Parental Rights and Responsibilities or Divorce. These legal interventions are often critical components of a survivor's safety plan and demand already outstrips our capacity in this program. **A funding cut means a court advocate won't be at each PFA docket and survivors will be on their own to navigate a foreign and intimidating system in the wake of trauma.**

It is not an overstatement to say that the safety planning services and resources survivors access at Caring Unlimited are lifesaving. With the support of CU's advocates, survivors have the opportunity to consider their options, increase their safety, and pave the road to freedom from their abuser. A client who recently worked with our legal program and accessed a number of other supportive services said this about the impact:

*"The staff and services that Caring Unlimited provide have changed my life. This program has helped me through 2 ½ of the most difficult years of my life. My lawyer from CU is amazing and has been a wonderful support to me through this complicated case. She helped me fight when I felt weak and defeated. She was attentive and compassionate and worked so hard to help me and my children.*

*Caring Unlimited helped me obtain food, housing, legal services, and supported me as a mom to my children in a difficult time. I was supported every step of the way. I don't know what I would have done without Caring Unlimited. I'd probably still be in an abusive, unhealthy situation with my children. Caring Unlimited changed my life for the better. I'm so happy this program is available to help families in need of these services."*

Our role in our community expands beyond the individual survivors and families with whom we work. Caring Unlimited sustains critical collaborations with other systems throughout York County including: law enforcement, the civil justice system, child protective services, homeless service providers, health care systems and mental health service providers, the recovery community, and the business community; all aimed at increasing safety for survivors and reducing the prevalence and impact of domestic abuse and violence. The losses we face will put enormous pressure on our residential services and overtax other systems, further fracturing the already tenuous community safety net- of which Caring Unlimited is an integral part

- The York County court system [relies on](#) our legal advocates to manage an increasingly high number of Protection from Abuse order requests and hearings. Our advocates provide case

negotiation that not only improves outcomes for survivors, but without which the system and could not effectively process their caseload.

- The York County Sheriff's Office and municipal police departments rely on our advocates to manage high-risk cases and provide vital safety planning services and emergency resources. These collaborations save lives and reduce homicides and prevent future crimes by ensuring victim safety and offender accountability.
- People who cannot remain safe in their homes will have to live with increased danger or face homelessness, seeking shelter at the same programs, including ours, that cannot meet the existing and growing demands.
- Schools, other service providers, and professionals turn to us for training, consultation, and education to prevent and intervene in domestic violence. Recently we have been called on to do even more. Statewide DVRCs and Sexual Assault Response Services have entered into agreements with colleges and universities to help them meet new requirements for services when students are victimized on campuses; we are asked to provide mandatory trainings on domestic violence and sexual abuse prevention by many other professional groups, and we are looked to offer Certified Domestic Violence Intervention Programs mandated by the court. We are already doing more with less.

The impact of these cuts on survivors in our community will be exponential. The loss of capacity in other VOCA funded court and legal assistance programs such as Victim/Witness Advocates, assistant District Attorneys and pro-bono legal community organizations would further deplete domestic violence victims' ability to navigate the systems charged with protecting them, find safety and experience justice. Offenders of domestic violence will be held less accountable, and victims and their children will suffer the consequences.

Please ensure that critical VOCA services are not lost and be clear that domestic violence has no place in our state, vote in favor of LD 2084.