

Testimony of Courtney Chasse
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 20, 2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Courtney Chasse, and I am writing on behalf of Hope and Justice Project in support of LD 2084 and the need for funding to maintain essential victim services in Maine.

“I am going to kill you and bury your body in the Maine woods where no one will ever find you”. This is a common threat made to domestic violence victims in Aroostook County. When a victim who is threatened reaches out for help, an accessible advocate needs to be there to respond. The cuts to our funding that will come without LD 2084 would create too many instances where that’s not possible.

Today, I write to you not only as the Executive Director of Hope and Justice Project (HJP), Aroostook County’s comprehensive domestic violence resource center, but also as a domestic violence advocate with 23 years of experience providing services in Maine’s largest county. Aroostook County is a vast area bordering Canada. Providing services county-wide is complicated and expensive. There are no major highways, and traveling the 100 plus miles from one end of the county to the other can take two and a half hours. This is important to note, as the county jail, the State Police Barracks, and the Sheriff’s Office are all located in Houlton, the county seat. Our county has nine local police departments, five district courts, two superior courts, and four hospitals. There is a lack of transportation, housing, holistic healthcare, childcare, reliable internet and phone services, pro bono attorneys, and law enforcement throughout the county. The lack of resources exacerbates a victim’s experience of abuse. Studies show

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that rural victims experience more severe assaults and are less likely to seek medical attention and support. The lack of transportation decreases a victim's ability to seek supports and medical attention often prolonging and increasing the negative impacts on their overall wellbeing. The services currently provided at Hope and Justice Project are designed with that understanding.

Hope and Justice Project provides services to victims of domestic, dating and sexual abuse and violence, stalking, and human trafficking. In 2023, we provided individual advocacy services to 1000 unduplicated survivors in Aroostook. That is a lot of people when considering Aroostook's population is only slightly over 67,000. We currently have 17 staff who are cross-trained to provide holistic services. And to ensure we can provide timely, responsive services to victims throughout our massive county, we operate three emergency shelters; two transitional houses; and five outreach offices. Our main services are individual advocacy, safety planning, emergency shelter, transitional housing, civil legal and criminal justice system advocacy, medical advocacy, financial literacy and supports, operation of a 24-hour hotline, support groups, domestic violence intervention program groups, children's advocacy, school-based prevention education, child protection liaison services, community awareness, system education, housing navigation, post-secondary school outreach, and connecting survivors to other community resources.

At HJP, individual advocacy means learning and understanding each individual survivor's experience to assist them in meeting all of their needs, whether it is help with safety planning, navigating the protection order process or the criminal justice system, or needing help to locate or remain in safe, affordable housing. Through individual advocacy, advocates are able to fill in the massive resource gaps that exist in Aroostook County. We meet survivors lacking transportation at safe locations closer to their homes to ensure their needs are met. We have housing navigators, with community connections, to assist

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survivors with rapid rehousing and state certified address confidentiality assistants to help survivors apply for a confidential address to enhance their safety. While we are not case managers, mental health counselors, or substance abuse counselors, advocates have been trained in trauma response and a few of our staff are recovery coaches. Therefore, HJP advocates are able to assist survivors with these needs while they are on incredibly long waiting lists for assistance.

In 2023, we sheltered 76 individuals, totaling almost 6000 bed-nights. While at shelter or residing in transitional housing, survivors have daily access to HJP advocates to help empower them to be successful in meeting their needs. Civil legal advocates assist survivors in enhanced safety planning through the use of court processes. They help with pro se protection orders and family matters, ensuring survivors are knowledgeable about each step in the process, empowered to speak about their experiences, and feel supported in their decisions. While not attorneys, our advocates help fill Aroostook County's gap of pro bono attorneys by supporting survivors who are unable to retain legal representation and would otherwise be navigating these complicated legal systems alone. Civil legal advocates also save judicial resources. Aroostook's District Court judges rely on HJP's civil legal advocates to facilitate consent agreements in all protection from abuse and protection from harassment case when the parties do not have representation. This reduces the amount of time courts need to spend in contested hearings in these cases or having judges facilitate these agreements themselves one at a time. Criminal justice advocates (CJA) assist survivors to navigate the criminal justice system process and navigate their statutory rights. While many survivors may be supported by victim witness advocates (VWA), not all survivors get referred to VWA. So HJP's CJA's help facilitate the connection between the survivor and the VWA and often provide ongoing support even after that connection is made to help the survivor navigate the criminal

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justice system as well as broader community resources that assist victims in achieving the safety and stability necessary to be able to participate as witnesses in these difficult proceedings. Due to the lack of VWA's in the northern section of Aroostook,¹ CJA's also support survivors when attending court to testify against their abusers in criminal proceedings, help with drafting or delivering victim impact statements, and help victims apply for victim compensation to cover uninsured expenses incurred as a result of the crime.

Our CJA's also assist survivors in reaching out to report incidents to police departments, facilitate enhanced safety planning meetings with criminal justice system partners, and work alongside all criminal justice systems from 911 dispatch, through probation to ensure survivor safety remains the focus in domestic violence calls. HJP also provides free training to criminal justice systems to ensure they meet their state required domestic violence training, such as ODARA, the domestic abuse risk assessment tool that law enforcement use when responding to domestic violence assaults. And HJP is a critical partner in ensuring Aroostook County's coordinated community response to survivors is functioning as intended. We have conducted six Best Practice Assessments with local, state, and county law enforcement departments and the district attorney's office. One assessment's findings led to the creation of a Domestic Violence Supplement form which is utilized throughout Aroostook County, by all Maine State Police Troops, and as a framework for the creation of other domestic violence supplements by local police departments throughout Maine. HJP also has an advocate who chairs Aroostook County's Task Force on Domestic and Sexual Abuse and Violence.

¹ It is VOCA funding, which this bill is designed to preserve, that helps to pay for the limited Victim Witness Advocate staff that exists in Aroostook County currently. A 60% cut to VOCA funding would have detrimental impact on the support crime victims are able to receive as criminal cases progress through Aroostook County courts.

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HJP advocates assist survivors in seeking medical attention for both their immediate needs, such as after an assault, as well as their overall health needs. Advocates go to emergency rooms to sit with survivors, transport survivors to medical appointments, and help survivors advocate for the best medical treatment based on their needs. HJP advocates also provide free education to healthcare providers, on topics such as strangulation and the long-term impact domestic violence has on a survivor's physical wellbeing.

Financial literacy and support offered through HJP provides survivors the opportunity to take control of their lives. It includes helping survivors to apply for education, employment, and government assistance. Helping survivors create budgets to ensure they can afford their bills on a single income or prepare for the financial ask in a family matter and ensuring that the lack of one month's rent will not have a devastating impact in their lives.

HJP's 24-hour hotline ensures survivors' emergency needs are met. Most calls that come in after regular work hours are due to a survivor needing immediate assistance because they were just assaulted or that is the only time their abuser has left long enough to allow them the opportunity to call for help. If HJP were to experience a 60% reduction in VOCA funding, we would struggle to maintain this service 24/7, and we know we would lose those survivors who rely on an after-hours response being available.

Support groups allow survivors time to heal and grow by discussing their experiences with other survivors. As we know, abuse does not stop because the victim has left. Abuse continues, and survivors need long-term support.

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In addition to providing court ordered domestic violence intervention programs for women, HJP's advocates also conduct the mandatory monitoring of the domestic violence intervention programs for men throughout the County.

HJP also educates and supports children who have experienced domestic violence who reside in our emergency shelters and upon request of the non-abusive parent. School-based educators go into elementary, middle, high, and post-secondary schools to speak about healthy relationships and behaviors that kids learn such as bullying and power and control while living in abusive homes to give kids healthy tools to resolve conflicts. Educators are also available to meet with students one-on-one who may be experiencing dating violence and help schools develop safety plans for these students so they can feel both physically and emotionally safe while at school. HJP has a Campus Outreach Advocate who provides services on all college campuses throughout the County free of charge to help each post-secondary school meet their state mandates.

HJP has a domestic violence-child protection liaison who works out of the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child and Family Services, offices in Aroostook. This advocate helps survivors navigate the CPS process to help ensure they are successful in either keeping their children out of the foster system or getting their children back after completing the mandatory requirements, and provides consultation services to OCFS caseworkers to assist in understanding the many nuances and impacts of domestic abuse and bringing to light the many ways non-abusive parents work to keep their children safe.

Our community awareness advocate helps provide education and events throughout the community. Education to help people recognize abuse and know that HJP is available to help and

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community events to raise awareness, show survivors they are not alone, and show abusers that their behaviors are not tolerated in their communities.

We have a bilingual advocate to assist with French speaking survivors in Northern Aroostook and to help coordinate services with our Canadian counterparts as necessary. To assist the aging population in the County, HJP has trained advocates who work with aging adults experiencing abuse by a partner, family member or caretaker. Oftentimes survivors are unaware of other services available to them in the County, HJP acts as a bridge in helping to both educate on and link survivors to other services through referrals. While this list may seem long, this list does not cover everything our advocates provide to survivors and the plethora of systems and service providers with whom we are connected.

Some survivors may only need a place to talk, but many others need comprehensive services, as each survivor's experience is unique. Therefore, HJP must have the ability to provide a vast array of services to help meet these needs, and we must be able to provide them across the vast geography of Aroostook County. While we receive funding from various sources-, VOCA is one of our largest sources of funding. A 60% cut in our VOCA funding will mean the closing of our central shelter and main office. as VOCA funds help supplement the funding provided by Maine State Housing Authority and Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, which help but do not wholly cover the operating costs of these facilities. This building houses more than half of our staff. A cut will also require HJP to eliminate three staff members. Because most of our other funding is specific to particular narrow services areas, this cut would require HJP to lose 3 direct service advocates who provide individual advocacy, safety planning, civil legal advocacy, and criminal justice advocacy. This will place severe limitations on the number of victims and types of services we will be able to provide as well as our cross-county coverage. We will no longer be able

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to assist survivors throughout the pro se court process for protection orders or family matters. We will not be able to help district courts negotiate protection orders or assist survivors when navigating the criminal justice system. Survivors needing help will need to find ways to meet our advocates at more centralized locations instead of advocates meeting survivors closer to their homes; our advocates will no longer be able to transport survivors to meet their medical needs.

So much of the work done and bridges built by HJP to span the gaps of Aroostook County's lack of resources for survivors will go away, and will set the progress Aroostook as made in responding to domestic violence backwards a full decade. HJP will no longer be able to offer trainings to community partners or participate in community education or awareness, as these advocates will need to turn their focus on trying to fill the gaps around direct services to survivors.

In addition to HJP, other victim services in Aroostook County are also at risk of significant cuts to funding, including victim witness advocates, sexual assault services, and free legal services for victims through Pine Tree Legal and Legal Services for the Elderly. The loss of these essential services would exacerbate the impact of violent crime in Aroostook County, for not only the people HJP serves, but for all crime victims, resulting in a devastating impact on our communities. Our services are life-saving. We ask that you please fund and prioritize this bill so other committees understand the importance and impact this funding has on all Maine communities.

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