

Testimony of Beth White
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989

In Support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime
Sponsored by Senator Anne Carney

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary,
Tuesday, January 23, 2024, at 1pm, State House Room 438

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Committee on Judiciary, I'm Beth White, director of politics and legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. The Maine Service Employees Association represents over 13,000 workers across the state, including the workers at Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine (SARSSM) and Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM).

We support LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime. Due to shortfalls in the federal Victims of Crime Fund, Maine is facing a 62% reduction to currently funded services. LD 2084 would fill this gap by allocating \$6 million per year, on an ongoing basis, to fund core services to victims of violent crimes. So far, at least 18 other states have acted to fill the gap in the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding on the state level, including every other state in New England. Now, Maine should follow their lead by passing and funding LD 2084.

The work done by sexual assault advocates and other workers in this field is critical, and the current funding cuts will be devastating if not addressed. Sexual assault advocates have challenging and complex jobs that vary significantly from day to day. They work with survivors who are experiencing one of the most difficult times of their lives, providing support and helping them navigate the days, weeks, months and years after an assault. As you can imagine, the types of support advocates provide varies from survivor to survivor. Not only is the work itself challenging, but experiencing so much secondary trauma can lead to physical and mental health impacts for many workers. Regardless of what tasks their day brings, their work is always related to sexual violence in some fashion, which is emotionally taxing.

Current funding levels do not provide a living wage for advocates. This leads to burnout and turnover. Many advocates take second jobs to make ends meet, which only adds to the risk of burnout. Additionally, workers are often required to be on call for the State Helpline outside of their typical work hours and are only paid a small stipend for doing so. If the funding shortfall is not filled by LD 2084, the impact will be catastrophic. Organizations like SASSMM and SARSSM are already struggling to retain advocates. If this funding shortfall were not filled, staffing would have to be reduced across the state, and potentially pay as well. This would place an even larger burden on remaining advocates, who would have to work even harder with fewer resources to help vulnerable Mainers. We encourage you to take time to read the testimonies submitted by advocates, who have a deep understanding of where and how these cuts would be detrimental to their work.

The advocates at agencies like SASSMM and SARSSM are doing incredibly difficult and essential work. Maine cannot afford to cut funding for these services or to reduce sexual assault support services. If anything, we need increased funding to hire more advocates and raise wages for everyone doing this work. Cutting funding for these services will lead to more advocates leaving the field whether due to staffing cuts, pay cuts or burnout. In turn, more survivors will go without the help and support they need. Please vote "ought to pass" on LD 2084. Thank you for your consideration.