

March 4, 2025

Good Afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Erin Frankhauser. I am an advocate at Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine, and I'm here to ask you to increase funding for sexual assault services by passing LD 117.

I am a systems advocate – I specialize in helping survivors and their families navigate the confusing systems they encounter after experiencing sexual violence. I accompany survivors to the hospital for medical exams, to law enforcement agencies to make reports, to the courts for criminal proceedings and for filing and negotiating Protection Orders.

I listen while they talk about the worst things that ever happened to them, and make sure they know that I believe them, and that they are not alone. Survivors often feel like nobody has ever felt this way, and may struggle with flashbacks and so much more. And while dealing with these feelings, survivors are asked to make decisions at a time when they can't comprehend what just happened, let alone what's next. Here's the value of advocacy – when they're faced with these decisions, while still reeling from their trauma, advocates can say – these are your options and I can support you to make choices that feel right for you.

Being an advocate is taxing and difficult work, to hold these stories, sit with those in pain, and support them through the complicated moments that follow. But like the advocates I work with across the state, I've seen how my work with survivors matters over and over again.

A mother was anxious her 3-year-old would have to testify in court about her father's abuse, because as a kid she had to, and remembered the trauma of talking about her abuse to a courtroom full of strangers. I was able to tell her new legislation makes it possible for children's advocacy center interviews to be admitted in court.

A survivor, homeless for 10 years, said I was the first person that believed her and without me, she might still be homeless.

Advocacy also helps the systems we interact with. For example, negotiating Protection Orders serves survivors who now don't have to rehash their trauma in open court, but also lightens the load on judges and court staff and saves communities money.

I am honored to do what I do. But this work I love doesn't pay enough that I can live on my own. A colleague told me as a single mother she lived in a rundown apartment and could barely afford groceries on her salary – she left the work she loved for better pay as a babysitter. Our Children's Advocacy Center went 8 months with only one family advocate, responsible for supporting every family they served.

If things do not change, this field will be unable to sustain a full workforce. A world with fewer advocates would be a disservice to survivors and to the communities they live in and systems they engage with. It would mean survivors walking into court blindly, having to explain what happened in detail in front of their abuser, meeting with prosecutors and not knowing what questions to ask. It would mean survivors feeling alone and their mental health suffering. It would mean law enforcement unable to call an advocate to support a survivor who is reporting, a child that doesn't get a forensic interview, Pine Tree

Legal not receiving referrals, and SAFE nurses losing the support they value in their ERs in the middle of the night.

Sexual violence happens a lot, survivors need the supports advocates provide, and without funding, this vital work is at risk. All the advocates who do this work and the survivors who depend on us are counting on you to make sure we have the funding we need. Please support us by funding sexual assault services and passing LD 117.

Thank you for your time today and I would be happy to answer any question you might have.

Erin Frankhauser, Systems Advocate
Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine