

February 26, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Jessica Gorton, and I am the Communications Coordinator at the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault. I am submitting testimony on behalf of an advocate of one of our coalition's sexual assault support centers in support of LD 117, an Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services. This person is both an advocate for victims of violence and a survivor themselves, and would prefer, because of the sensitivity of their story, to remain anonymous. Their testimony is below:

"To explain why this funding is so incredibly important, I could tell you about the vital role I play as an advocate, supporting survivors through the systems that they encounter after an assault: at hospital emergency departments during forensic medical exams, while seeking court-ordered protection from their abuser through the civil court process; and through the criminal process including reporting to law enforcement and at the court as they seek justice and accountability. I could testify on the countless calls I've taken through the 24-hour, free, confidential support line, in the middle of the night and on weekends, supporting survivors when they most needed it. I could tell you so many inspiring stories of bearing witness to traumatized individuals being able to move from identifying as a victim to knowing they are a survivor - and not only surviving but thriving.

I could tell you how important it is to help fund crucial victim support services from my decade of professional experience. Instead, I would like to share how these services have been a lifeline to me personally, as a survivor myself.

Imagine doing this work every day, supporting victims/survivors through the most difficult times in their lives, only to go home at the end of the day and experience the same types of abuse. Imagine day in and day out experiencing abuse and having to keep it a secret. Imagine being afraid to call for help, due to embarrassment and shame, because the people I work with would learn what I was going through. Imagine pretending everything was fine so that my colleagues would not worry. Imagine suffering in silence while assisting others to receive the help they desperately needed to stay safe, get medical help and pursue justice – help I needed too. Imagine feeling paralyzed and too traumatized to help myself while at the same time helping others find the courage and strength to do what I could not do for myself.

Now - imagine me talking to an advocate who has confidentiality privilege, so I could feel safe to share what I was going through without fear of anyone else finding out until I was ready. Imagine that advocate, knowing I was also an advocate, understanding that it doesn't matter how much you know or how connected you are, that domestic and sexual violence can happen to anyone. Imagine them understanding my fear and anxiety and listening without judgment. Imagine them assisting me with safety planning until I could figure out what my next steps would be, checking in on me, talking about options, and helping me work through my feelings around what leaving would mean – how my choices and decisions would impact not only myself, but the children, my pets, and our extended family.

Now I'll ask you to imagine me on a Saturday, having found the strength to try to leave and my abuser breaking my hand to prevent me. Imagine him not allowing me to seek medical attention because he was worried what I would tell them and that he would lose his job. Imagine me walking into work

Monday morning with a broken hand, in tears, telling my boss that I needed to go to urgent care to get help. Imagine the emergency surgery to repair broken bones and after telling the surgeon what had happened, he in turn says to my abuser, "So you're the bad guy" on the day of surgery, putting me in more danger. Imagine me returning home with my abuser and then having to call 911 and have police respond. Imagine the victim advocate at the district attorney's office and the investigator telling me that I was the nicest person that they know and asking me what they could do to keep me safe. Imagine the advocate helping me through the protection order process as I was so traumatized that I couldn't get my thoughts down on paper. Imagine her patience and understanding as she helped me regulate my emotions and supported me throughout the court hearing. Imagine the prosecuting attorney telling me that it was not me that was charging my abuser, but the state, and that his criminal consequences were not my fault. Imagine the powerful impact of everyone I encountered telling me that it was not my fault and that they would support me and help me find the strength to leave for good. I kept telling myself that I'm an advocate, I should know what to do without needing help. But I did need help. And that help was there to support me through this ordeal and keep me safe.

I don't know what I would have done without the advocates that continued to meet with me and support me through all of this. I don't know where I would be today if it weren't for these incredibly amazing people and their support. I don't know that I would have had the courage to leave. I don't know that I would have been able to maintain my employment. I don't know how I would have managed to continue my college education and finish my degree. I don't know how I would be not only surviving, but thriving today.

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony and I ask that you please support and vote in favor of this bill to help ensure that these crucial (and quite frankly, life-saving) services continue to be available for all victims/survivors of sexual violence."