

February 21, 2025

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

My name is Heather Tryon, and I am a resident of Bangor and an employee of Rape Response Services.

I am submitting testimony in support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

While I have been a sexual assault advocate for just over a year, I am also a LMSW (Licensed Master Social Worker) and have served children and families for nearly 20 years in three states through work in adoption, foster care, and advocacy through my local Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. The work that I do now as a sexual assault advocate is, in some ways, a continuance of that work with children and families. For example, in the past year I developed trainings for foster families and other professionals around issues of sexual abuse and presented at a statewide conference for child welfare professionals. Like all sexual assault advocates, I have supported survivors in court, at the police department, at the hospital, at school meetings, and in other venues. I have seen first-hand the absolute necessity of having a trauma-informed advocate whose first and only purpose is to support the survivor while they interact with systems that will not necessarily bring them justice and may cause further trauma. It is heartbreaking to see survivors of all ages – and I have supported toddlers and older – going through this process and in these situations. Conversely, it is awe-inspiring to see survivors finding their voices and feeling empowered to fight for their own needs.

As part of my work, I also facilitate peer support groups for both men and women in both a local prison and a local jail. I've found that many of the residents have experienced trauma before making the decisions for which they were incarcerated. Residents, both men and women, have disclosed experiencing sexual violence, sometimes for the first time. It's my hope that the groups and our support may be one tiny piece of the puzzle of their lives moving toward health and safety.

In addition to being an experienced professional, I am a mother of two children, 12 and 15. The reality of my situation is that the only reason I can do this work is because my children are old enough to not need childcare and I am married to someone who makes significantly more than I do and has a flexible schedule. Were it not for him, I would not be able to support myself and my children given the cost of housing and other expenses. I would have to leave this work for something with a higher income. His flexible schedule means that he can cover the dinners, basketball games, robotics

competitions, scouting events, and other activities, both significant and mundane, in my children's lives that I have to miss because I have to remain available because I am on call or because I have been called upon to support a survivor. My children understand the work that I do and its importance, but that doesn't make it any easier when Mom isn't able to be with them for something.

This work is complex, vulnerable, and asks that advocates stand witness with survivors in the injustices that so often are visited on them even after their initial experiences. We do it gladly because it is important, because we care about the health and well-being of people whose horrendous experiences are not of their own making. However, it takes its toll on advocates and requires that we have a good support system, robust coping skills, and as low-stress a personal life as possible so we can recharge and be ready when the next survivor needs us. If you want to maintain people in this work who provide a depth of experience, knowledge, and training, it must be financially sustainable to do so. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to support LD 117. Thank you for your time and consideration.