

February 14, 2025

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

My name is Susan Koch, I am a resident of Jay, Maine, and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services, in support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

2 years ago, I sent this committee testimony about why increasing our wages was so important and things have only gotten worse. As a long time employee of a Sexual Assault Center, I have seen the need for our services become more complex. When I started in the field we had a Helpline, support groups and did community education. Now our services include doing Prevention Education for all ages in the schools, Community Education, Helpline, Support Groups, Human Trafficking Survivor support, drop-in services at schools and centers for survivors struggling with substance abuse, and Children's Advocacy Services.

Our Children Advocacy Centers are a child friendly space where Forensic Interviews are done when there are allegations of child sexual abuse and witness to violence. We then support the children and non-offending care givers on a path to healing. We support Survivors in the medical setting, court settings and with law enforcement. We collaborate with many systems to help the survivor.

The clients we speak with and support have also changed in that they come to us with more needs than before. Mental health issues, drug dependency issues, basic needs such as housing, among others - which we need to help them address even before we can support them with their healing journey.

Many Centers have fewer volunteers on our 24/7 Helpline, so staff is not only working during the days but also providing nights and weekend support for survivors of sexual violence. It has been a challenge for several years now to find volunteers to staff our Helpline. Along with our services, we also must do fundraising, which is time consuming and getting harder with the economic atmosphere in the last couple of years.

Over my time as an advocate, raises in pay were generally 2% each year, but only if it was in the budget. And for many of us, the 2% did not reflect rising costs of living. But the cost of health care, gas, food, rent and other essentials did go up. For myself, if I did not have a spouse that also had income, I would not be able to continue doing this work.

We as staff/advocates are committed to this work and helping with the healing of the survivors of sexual violence, but we too need to survive and not worry about whether we can pay rent or pay for an unexpected medical bill. There is so much more that we do, and so many of the women and men I work with go above and beyond for survivors.

In closing, it is my hope you realize the importance of our services for survivors, and the importance of the staff that provide those services. I am honored to work with such dedicated and caring people.

I want to thank you for your time and hope you see the value of our services and our commitment and vote in favor of LD 117.