

March 6, 2025

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

My name is Jess Boulay, and I am a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) Advocate working for Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services. I cover the Franklin County area, but SAPARS also covers Androscoggin and Oxford counties.

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

I was hired at the end of October as the SART advocate. Before I could take on any clients, I went through onboarding, began building connections with community partners, and completed the 40+ hour Advocacy Training, which I finished in January. That training is required for every new advocate, and it's there that we learn what our role is, the core skills advocates need, and how to use those skills to support survivors. Within the same week of finishing my training I received 3 referrals and then 3 more. I served these clients and the next clients - currently I have 5 clients with more coming soon from scheduled Forensic Interviews, helpline referrals, and systems referrals.

This is what every advocate does every day: we take on clients, we serve clients, and we take on more clients. We even find the time to check in with past clients to ensure they are doing well and healing. All of these clients are survivors, survivors of vulgar, despicable acts. They had their power ripped from them, torn away and discarded like they were nothing. As an advocate it is our job to empower them again, show them that their words have power, that they have choices, and that they are not at fault for what happened to them! We create safer spaces and welcome survivors to process however they need to. That might mean going with them to file a Protection From Abuse order, referring them to legal representation, being a support in court when their case is called, accompanying them to law enforcement to make a statement, referring them to mental health services, seeking any resources they may need, safety planning, listening, and empowering. EVERY SINGLE DAY. We do this, without a thought for ourselves, because it isn't about us.

We also take shifts on helpline calls and accompaniment calls, meaning we listen to survivors or support survivors during our weekends, after our work shift ends, we are still on call. When we accompany survivors to the hospital for a forensic exam, these exams can last up to 4 hours. It is invasive and leaves survivors completely exposed and vulnerable, after already being made to feel vulnerable, but it is our job to be there. To support them. To offer them what ever they need in that moment to give them a little power back.

I don't expect you to fully comprehend what someone goes through when they are sexually assaulted. It's not something anyone should have to go through. Survivors live with those memories daily. Advocates and anyone else in the field have to comprehend and bear witness so we can support survivors. That is our job and some days, many days, that job is hard. A price could never be put on this type of work, but a livable wage would be a great start.

I urge you to vote to pass this bill so that we and others at sexual assault centers across the state can continue to provide these unique and critical services to some of Maine's most vulnerable populations.

Thank you for your time and consideration,
Jess Boulay
SART Advocate/SAPARS