

2/18/2025

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

My name is Colleen Walker and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Rape Response Services, in Penobscot County, where I am an advocate and project coordinator.

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

As advocates, a substantial portion of our time—often up to a quarter of our month or year - is spent on-call, ready to provide critical support when survivors need it. We respond to these calls because survivors of sexual assault should never have to face this trauma alone, and because our support makes a real difference in the outcomes for our clients. However, these on-call hours often come at the expense of valuable time with family and friends, pursuing hobbies, maintaining self-care, or taking on a second job. It means that I leave the comfort of my home at night, drive through snowstorms, spend hours by a survivor's side during a Sexual Assault Forensic Exam, which can take 6-8 hours of intense, one-on-one emotional support... only to return home, take a nap and start my (office hours) workday.

The role of an advocate is multifaceted and demanding, with responsibilities that can vary greatly day to day. Beyond direct services, our work also includes a wide range of individual to systemic level work, like:

- Collaborating with schools and partner organizations to create environments that reduce the risk of sexual violence.
- Engaging with college students, many of whom are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, providing them with a safe space to share their experiences.
- Educating children about personal body safety and online safety to protect themselves from in person or online manipulation and grooming.
- Supporting vulnerable populations, such as individuals experiencing homelessness, who may not have another reliable person to turn to for emotional support and safety planning.
- Assisting families navigating the devastating discovery of sexual abuse, such as a mother learning that her child has been assaulted by a family member.
- Preparing and delivering training sessions for school staff, helping them respond appropriately when students disclose abuse.
- Empowering individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to understand their right to personal autonomy and bodily integrity.
- Providing helpline support to minors experiencing workplace sexual harassment at their very first job.
- Supporting individuals at courthouses across Penobscot and Piscataquis counties in getting a Protection from Abuse order.

- Planning and completing awareness campaigns.
- Completing extremely detailed data entry to fulfill our grant requirements, so that we can keep the funding we do have to pay for our services.

In every facet of our work: confidentiality, professionalism, genuine care and accuracy are required. I do this work because it is necessary, and I am deeply committed to it. However, the reality is that the financial strain I feel undermines my ability to consider continuing in this field. The financial challenges I and my fellow advocates face—rising costs of living, the wear and tear on personal vehicles, and the inability to afford professional mental health support—are significant. Half of my wages go directly to rent. Many including myself are paid less than individuals in entry-level positions with fewer responsibilities and the ability to "clock out" at the end of the day.

The emotional toll of vicarious trauma is another heavy burden that advocates carry, often without the compensation or support necessary to manage it. This is evident in turnover rate at every single SV center across Maine. Our pay does not reflect the value of the critical work we perform, and it is becoming more and more difficult to fill open positions as my colleagues across the state leave for better pay with fewer demands on their skill and their hearts.

We know that diverse voices are needed to meet the needs of our communities. However, the reality is that many of the individuals who remain in this field do so because they have a partner with a higher income who can help subsidize the financial challenges of working in this essential, but underpaid, role. These are dedicated and empathetic advocates, but they don't share the lived experiences of certain survivors we serve – and we need those experiences represented in our ranks as well. That will only be possible if they can afford to do this work.

Advocacy is vital, and those of us who dedicate ourselves to it deserve to be fairly compensated for our labor. To continue delivering high-quality services, we must address the financial inequities that exist within our field. I am very concerned about the sustainability of this important work. Please help us make sure these services continue to be available for survivors, by funding LD 117.

Thank you for your ongoing support!