

March 5, 2025

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

My name is Heather Turner. I work as an advocate at Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services and I am writing to express my strong support for LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

I am an advocate first and foremost, and some of my most effective advocacy happens through my role as an educator with SAPARS. In this part of my work, my approach is “see a need, fill a need”. The risk of experiencing sexual violence rises when people don’t have what they need to make their own choices – and through my work, I have the great privilege of helping fill those needs. I get to help make our schools and our communities safer – one lesson at a time.

In the classroom, I might be offering young people the opportunity to claim their autonomy and understand that they are the boss of their own bodies—perhaps for the very first time. In a community or library setting, I’m engaging with teens to explore what it means to be a good bystander or to identify the true essence of a healthy relationship. I work with parents, teachers, librarians, and other caregivers, equipping them with the tools to protect children through vital curricula.

Maine’s sexual violence educators are able to provide programs for any safe, concerned adult or caregiver, teaching them how to spot signs of grooming and childhood sexual assault—and, crucially, what to do if they suspect it’s happening. Our prevention education is based on facts, grounded in trauma-informed principles, and shaped by best practices and empathy. But we can only do this work if we have the funding we need to hire enough advocates to meet the needs of our communities – needs that are only growing over time, while our funding and our wages stagnate.

Here’s a question I’d like an answer to: If, as a community and as a state, we don’t fund this work, how can we claim to truly prioritize child safety? Advocates and educators have made it their mission to teach every safe adult how to protect children, but without funding, we are left asking if our work and the safety of children are truly valued. Are we going to support this critical work? Or will we force advocates and educators to choose between helping to keep Maine’s children safe and making their next rent payment?

Without funding, that’s exactly what we’re being asked to do. We are the ones on the front lines, making sure children are as protected as we can, making far less than a living wage. But as policymakers, it’s up to you to decide if YOU believe Maine’s children are worth it... because we already know they are.