

February 24, 2025

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

My name is Melissa Doyle, and I am a resident of Brunswick. I am submitting testimony as both a resident and on behalf of Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM), the Sexual Assault Center supporting residents of Waldo, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, and Eastern Cumberland counties.

My testimony is in support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

As the Associate Director at SASSMM and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, I can attest to the powerful impact that sexual assault services and our advocates have on our communities in the Midcoast and throughout the state. The critical support we offer survivors starts with our youngest citizens – in both our prevention work in schools and in our Child Advocacy Centers (CAC), where we provide forensic interviews for children who have experienced sexual abuse and assault in a safe, trauma-informed setting. Our CACs are seeing a record number of cases, and the number continues to grow each year – yet lately we are often short-staffed. In 2024, we lost a CAC family advocate and an experienced forensic interviewer, primarily due to salary concerns. Our advocates and forensic interviewers leave this work not because they don't want to do it but because they simply can't do it and support themselves and their families.

In 2024, without our CAC, 140 children in Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Knox, and Waldo counties would not have been interviewed by experts about their experience of child sexual abuse. 179 parents and caregivers would not have received support and referrals from our family advocates. Without our sexual assault advocates, 103 clients would have gone to court alone for Protection from Abuse orders and 45 clients would have not had an advocate accompany them to the hospital for a forensic medical exam. Over 600 clients received SASSMM services in 2024.

Our advocates work tirelessly and effectively with our partners, including sexual assault forensic nurses (SAFEs), law enforcement, community partners, and child protective services, to provide critical care and support in courtrooms, hospital emergency rooms, and during interviews. Our advocates meet and talk with clients at all hours, whether it's 2pm or 2am – or anytime in between. We answer helpline calls 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year – there is always an advocate available. Advocates go to schools and community centers – anywhere a client needs us to be. At a time when so many of our health care and child protection systems are overwhelmed, removing this critical service puts Maine adults, children, and families at further risk and removes the critical opportunity for coordination among partners.

I want to thank the committee for the work you have already done to support survivors and strongly urge you to vote in favor of this bill so that individuals, families, and communities can engage with services where they are listened to, supported, and believed. Our communities

deserve to have these services, but they will be lost if our advocates can't support themselves while providing support to so many others.

With gratitude,

Melissa Doyle, LCSW