

DATE: 3/6/25

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

My name is Shawna Austin, I am a resident of Wilton, Maine and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services.

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

Currently I am the Associate Director at our agency and have been in this role for 6 years. My primary responsibilities are to support our staff and programs and to move our mission forward to end sexual violence in all its forms.

Prior to taking a position in leadership I spent 5 years as an advocate working in rural Oxford County with survivors with who had experienced various forms of abuse and trauma. In my time as a Rural Outreach Advocate, I provided education in the community about our free and confidential support services, facilitated many support groups, met with clients and loved ones about their abuse, provided referrals to community partners, supported survivors at court and in the hospital, and staffed our 24/7 helpline services.

Advocacy work can be both exhausting and incredibly rewarding. The time, investment, and energy that is necessary to support others in their healing journey is a heavy lift and also crucial for those we serve. Advocates are sounding boards when survivors recount traumatic experiences often with vivid detail that is hard to hear. But advocates rise to those challenges, as we are called to empower our survivors, meet them where they are at, and help them regain control of their lives after the horrific moments they have gone through. So many survivors refrain from speaking about their abuse due to shame, guilt, and fear of not being believed. We are those believers. So many survivors turn inward and feel unworthy of support – increasing their mental health challenges. We show them they are worthy of care. I have seen firsthand that trauma informed, free, confidential support to humans who have experienced harm is powerful and healing, not only survivors themselves but also the family and friends who love them.

We wake up every day and show up every day for survivors. We show up and fight to make a change in the lives of others. We do this because of our passion for our community and the health and well-being of others. We do this because we really believe in the mission, the work, and the reality that the people in our lives should not experience sexual violence or any kind of harm. Although my current position is in leadership, I continue to staff our helpline services, facilitate support groups, and work in high schools where I am providing direct service and meeting with students who experience sexual harassment, past child sexual abuse, and ongoing unhealthy relationships. Increasing wages would not only support my family, it would support our organization with staff sustainability. Over the past few years, we have struggled to fill open positions due to not having funds to offer a livable salary. Staff needing to decide between a job they love and are deeply passionate about and affording housing and food for their families has

been incredibly disheartening. Survivors share openly that they rely on our services for hope and healing and when we cannot fill positions and do our work, our communities suffer for it.

Understandably, when our agency is short staffed the workload increases on current staff. The risk here is evident that the heavier the workload, the more possibilities arise for burn out and eventual departure from advocate positions. Our staff are passionate and caring humans who do extremely difficult work and should receive appropriate compensation for their tireless dedication. I am hopeful that you will pass this bill so we can compensate our staff and continue the work supporting some of Maine's most vulnerable populations.

Thank you for your support!