

March 12, 2025

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

My name is Jamie Demers and I am submitting testimony as the Outreach and Client Services Coordinator at Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services (SAPARS), the sexual assault support center that serves Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties.

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

SAPARS is the only organization in the tri-county area that has the expertise and training to support people who have experienced sexual violence in our communities. Advocates provide a safe place for people who have been traumatized in the most intimate way, to be heard, supported, and provided with resources. We are prepared to hear things that most people don't want to imagine happens in their community. We hear all the time from our clients, "this is the first time I have told someone," or "this is the first time someone has listened to/believed me/told me it wasn't my fault." These are some of the most powerful things that we provide to survivors and we play a critical role in helping people get on a path to healing. Without these services survivors will suffer in silence and will find other ways, often less healthy ways, to cope with the trauma.

SAPARS is also the umbrella organization for the Children's Advocacy Center of Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties (CACAF0). CACAF0 provides a child-centered, trauma informed, multidisciplinary approach when there are concerns of child sexual abuse and other forms of child abuse and neglect. Children can receive a forensic interview with someone who has training and expertise in talking to kids in a non-leading, legally sound, trauma informed way. Caregivers are supported throughout the process and connected with additional services and resources for themselves and their children. Multidisciplinary team members are able to gather the information they need from the forensic interview, which leads to more thorough investigations and more successful prosecutions.

In addition to the direct service work that SAPARS does, we also provide a wide range of sexual violence prevention programming for students in K-12, college students, teachers, and other community organizations. We are the only organization in our area teaching children and adults strategies to prevent child sexual abuse, talking to teenagers about the importance of consent, and teaching educators how to recognize and respond to students that have experienced sexual violence.

Over the past few years SAPARS has struggled to fully staff our organization. There have been several open positions that we were unable to fill because we couldn't make a competitive salary offer. We have offered jobs to passionate, caring candidates who just couldn't take a pay cut. Staff have chosen to leave because the cost of living has increased at higher rates than we

could increase wages. When the organization is short staffed, the additional burden on current staff is overwhelming and can lead to burn out and more advocates making the difficult decision to leave the work that they love.

Being able to pay our staff a livable wage would help us to retain staff and would ensure that our current staff are not having to choose between taking an additional job and/or finding a different job that allows them to pay rent and afford groceries. SAPARS has an incredibly dedicated and passionate group of people who do this very difficult work – they would not be easy to replace.

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.

Sincerely,

Jamie Demers
Outreach and Client Services Coordinator