

March 12, 2025

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

My name is Jaime McLeod, and I am a resident of Winthrop. I am submitting testimony in support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

I work as fundraising and communications coordinator for the Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center of Kennebec and Somerset Counties and its Children's Advocacy Center. Though the majority of my duties fall within the administrative realm, I'm proud to work for an organization that insists upon every staff member becoming trained and certified to provide direct support services to the thousands of survivors who reach out to us for help each year through Maine's statewide sexual assault helpline.

When a sexual assault survivor picks up the phone to seek help, that person is making an incredibly vulnerable choice: to invite another person to share in one of the worst experiences of their life. The trauma may be fresh, or it may have been festering for years. Many callers feel ashamed about what's happened to them or feel responsible for it in some way. Most have no idea what resources are available to them, legally, medically, or otherwise. Sexual assault advocates are there, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, not only to reassure survivors that someone believes them, supports them, and knows they are not to blame for what happened to them, but also to help them understand and navigate the complex and often emotionally triggering series of events that follow a disclosure of sexual violence. Advocates accompany survivors as they access a sexual assault forensic exam at a local hospital, make a report to law enforcement, or appear in court to confront the person who assaulted them. They refer survivors to mental health professionals or to free legal services to help them file for a protection order, connect them to a support group, help them obtain a confidential address, or walk them through applying for victim compensation funds.

Maine's sexual assault advocates are competent professionals who undertake dozens of hours of training each year to ensure that the services they provide are not only sensitive and trauma-informed, but also culturally competent and follow current best practices. They must remain up-to-date on state and federal laws and with the ever-shifting map of resources available to clients. They deserve to make not only a living wage that ensures they and their families can keep their heads above water during a time when the costs of everything from groceries to home heating oil are increasing at staggering rates; they deserve to be compensated at a rate that reflects their level of skill, compassionate care for their clients, and the depth of their expertise. Sexual assault advocates are well educated and, in many cases, are carrying tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt, which makes meeting the basic costs of living even more challenging. With grocery stores and fast food establishments routinely advertising hourly wages of \$15 to \$20 an hour or more, it's only fair that these dedicated and high-trained professionals' compensation should reflect the complex, and often emotionally challenging, nature of their work.