

To: Maine State Health & Human Services Committee

Date: 3/15/2025

From: Danni Stubenrod – Vassalboro resident and sexual assault survivor

Re: Written testimony for LD117 to find sexual assault services

My fellow Mainers:

Honorable members of the committee, I stand before you today not just as an individual, but as a voice amplified by the countless survivors of sexual assault who have been silenced, marginalized, and forgotten. I am a survivor. I am a veteran. I am transgender. And I am here to demand change.

My story is not unique, but it is a stark illustration of the systemic failures that perpetuate sexual violence. During my time in the military, I was outed as transgender and subsequently subjected to a brutal gang rape by my platoon mates. This was not merely an act of violence; it was a targeted assault designed to strip me of my identity, my dignity, and my humanity. It was an assault that underscored the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by marginalized individuals, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+.

The word "rape" is powerful, and it is a word we must speak aloud. In today's politically charged climate, the voices of women, and particularly those of survivors, are too often dismissed or ignored. This dismissal is not merely a matter of rhetoric; it has real-world consequences for the lives of those who have experienced sexual violence.

As advocate and actress Mariska Hargitay eloquently stated, "The foundation is about supporting survivors, but also reclaiming ourselves before the assault or the violence happened, reclaiming that 'before' and not letting something define you but knowing that it's a thing that happened and it is not who you are." This powerful sentiment speaks to the core of what survivors need: not just immediate support, but a sustained pathway to reclaiming their lives and their autonomy.

Women's autonomy is under relentless attack. From the subtle acts of dehumanization, such as the intentional misgendering of Congresswoman Sara McBride by a male legislator – a tactic that mirrors the power dynamics inherent in sexual assault – to the overt acts of violence that I and countless others have endured, the message is clear: our bodies, our identities, and our voices are not our own.

The intersectionality of my experience as a transgender woman adds a critical layer of vulnerability. Being outed and then assaulted was a calculated act of violence, designed to strip me of my identity and dignity. This reality is faced by many marginalized individuals, including LGBTQ+ survivors, who often experience compounded trauma and face additional barriers to accessing support. Studies have shown that LGBTQ+

individuals are at a higher risk of sexual violence compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. This disparity underscores the urgent need for tailored support services that address the unique needs of these communities.

We must acknowledge that sexual violence is not an isolated issue; it is a systemic problem rooted in power imbalances, gender inequality, and a culture that too often normalizes sexual harassment and assault. To address this crisis, we must move beyond individual acts of support and confront the systemic failures that perpetuate this violence.

First and foremost, survivors need allies. They need individuals and institutions that will stand with them, believe them, and support them on their journey to healing. This support, however, comes at a cost. As the Director of the Sisters in Arms Center in Augusta, my friend Rebecca witnesses the daily struggles of survivors who lack access to essential resources. My own work with “Healing Waters, Broken to Beautiful,” a Maine-based outreach resource, underscores the urgent need for expanded support networks.

The need for full-time advocacy is just the beginning. We must address the following systemic failures:

**Addressing the Rape Kit Backlog:** The backlog of unprocessed rape kits is a national disgrace. Each unprocessed kit represents a potential denial of justice and a missed opportunity to identify perpetrators. While Maine may have a lower backlog per capita compared to other states, any backlog is unacceptable. Survivors deserve timely processing of evidence, which is crucial for both their healing and the pursuit of justice.

**Increased Funding for Survivor Services:** Crisis centers, counseling services, and legal aid organizations are chronically underfunded. Survivors often face financial barriers to accessing these crucial resources. We must significantly increase funding to ensure that all survivors have access to the support they need. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), funding for victim services remains inadequate to meet the needs of survivors.

**Comprehensive Prevention Education:** We must invest in prevention programs that address the root causes of sexual violence, including toxic masculinity, gender inequality, and the normalization of sexual harassment. This education must begin at a young age and continue throughout life. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) emphasize the importance of prevention strategies that address social norms and promote healthy relationships.

**Improved Reporting and Investigation Processes:** We need to create safe and accessible reporting mechanisms for survivors and ensure that law enforcement agencies are properly trained to handle sexual assault cases with sensitivity and competence. This includes training on how to properly interact with transgender and non-binary survivors. The Department of Justice (DOJ) provides resources and guidance on best practices for responding to sexual assault.

Addressing Military Sexual Trauma (MST): As a veteran, I am acutely aware of the prevalence of MST. The military must take stronger measures to prevent sexual assault and provide comprehensive support to survivors. This includes ending the culture of impunity that allows perpetrators to escape accountability. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers resources and support for veterans who have experienced MST, but more needs to be done.

Access to Affordable Healthcare: Survivors often require long-term medical and mental health care. Access to affordable healthcare is vital for their recovery. This includes access to trauma-informed care and specialized services for survivors of sexual violence.

Legal Protections: We must ensure that survivors have strong legal protections, including access to restraining orders and protection from retaliation. This includes protections for transgender and non-binary individuals who may face additional barriers to accessing legal support.

We must shift the narrative from victim-blaming to survivor support. We must create a society where survivors are believed, supported, and empowered to heal. This requires a fundamental shift in our culture, our policies, and our practices.

The time for action is now. We cannot afford to wait any longer. We must invest in survivor services, implement comprehensive prevention strategies, and hold perpetrators accountable. We must create a world where survivors are not only supported, but where sexual violence is no longer tolerated.

Respectfully submitted,

Danni Stubenrod  
(Deril Stubenrod)