

TODD R. COLLINS
District Attorney

STATE OF MAINE

KARI WELLS-PUCKETT
Deputy District Attorney

CHRISTIANA REIN
MATTHEW HUNTER
AMANDA BRIDGES
IAN M. ANDERSON
Assistant District Attorneys



OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY
AROOSTOOK COUNTY
PROSECUTORIAL DISTRICT NUMBER 8

144 Sweden Street
Caribou, ME 04736-2353
207-498-2557
FAX 207-493-3493

27 Riverside Drive
Presque Isle, ME 04769-2730
207-764-0504
FAX 207-764-2046

26 Court Street, Suite 101
Houlton, ME 04730
207-532-4294
FAX 207-532-1504

Testimony of Amy Ward, Victim/Witness Advocate
In Support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
March 19, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyers, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Amy Ward, and I am a Victim/Witness Advocate within the Aroostook County Office of the District Attorney, Prosecutorial District #8. Thank you for this opportunity to pledge my support of LD 875 and the need for funding for essential services for victims of domestic violence in Maine. We know that domestic violence is pervasive throughout our state. The services in jeopardy today are critical in assisting victims to get on their feet, rebuild their lives, and heal.

As a prosecution-based Victim/Witness Advocate in Aroostook County, I see firsthand the impact that domestic violence has on victims, families, and communities. Our office received 299 new reports of domestic violence crimes from law enforcement during the 2024 calendar year. Studies indicate that only a fraction of all domestic violence incidents are reported to law enforcement, presented to a district attorney's office, and ultimately prosecuted – so the true number of Aroostook County residents experiencing domestic violence is actually much higher than that. The victims associated with those 299 new cases received the assistance and guidance of a Victim/Witness Advocate – either myself or one of my colleagues in offices around “The County”. But, in our roles, we have some limitations on the services we can provide. This is why resource centers, like the Hope & Justice Project, are absolutely vital to our communities.

When I hear from a victim on my caseload that they have connected with the Hope & Justice Project, I breathe a sigh of relief. I know that this person will receive the most support that our community has to offer. When a victim requires assistance beyond what I can provide for them in my role, I confidently refer them to the Hope & Justice Project. Victims of domestic violence often face countless challenges when assessing their own situation and the feasibility of leaving their abuser. They need the basics for survival, of course – housing, food, water. They also need a pathway to financial independence. They may need a cell phone of their own, childcare, transportation, financial/medical benefits, legal assistance, help with filing for Protection from Abuse Orders or divorce actions, or help navigating the Child Protective Services system. They need to feel supported and know that they are not alone. They

may want to connect with a support group, a counselor or a therapist. As a prosecution-based advocate, I am limited in my ability to assist with many of these barriers. The Hope & Justice Project, however, aids with these challenges – plus more. I often lean on advocates at the Hope & Justice Project to bridge this gap. While in an abusive relationship, it is common for victims to be isolated from their friends and family. Domestic violence resource centers like the Hope & Justice Project, and the advocates employed within them, serve as a lifeline for individuals who might otherwise have no one to help, and nowhere else to turn. It truly is an honor to work alongside and collaborate with these remarkable individuals.

From a prosecution standpoint, we have seen that criminal case outcomes are better when victims feel fully supported. The enormous strength it takes to testify is bolstered, the likelihood of recantation is decreased, and their reliance on their abuser is diminished. Sadly, the demand for services to meet these needs far exceeds the capacity of current resources. Gaps in services already exist. Without adequate funding, The Hope & Justice Project has been forced to make cuts to staffing, scale back on services provided, and limit housing/shelter options for victims.

Without the passage of LD 875, these services will continue to be strained. We cannot allow more victims to fall through the cracks. We have seen the positive impact that these centers have in our communities, in the courtroom, and in the lives of the staggering number of Mainers that have utilized their services. This simply cannot be understated.

I respectfully urge you to prioritize funding for domestic violence resource centers and pass LD 875. I am a firm believer that victim services are crime prevention services. When victims of domestic violence have what they need to heal from their experience, they are less vulnerable to future victimization and less likely to cause harm to others. Your support today will not only improve and enhance the services provided to domestic violence victims, but it will also be one step towards creating a safer Maine.

Sincerely,

Amy Ward

Victim/Witness Advocate

Office of the District Attorney

Presque Isle, ME