

Testimony of Rebekah Paredes on behalf of New Hope Midcoast
In Support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence
March 19, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyers, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Rebekah Paredes, and I am writing on behalf of New Hope Midcoast, the Regional Domestic Violence Resource Center, serving Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Knox & Waldo Counties. I want to share why support for this critical funding is so important.

New Hope Midcoast believes that a life free from abuse is a fundamental human right. We work to build a culture that will not tolerate domestic abuse. We support people as they create pathways to safety. By educating and empowering our communities, we support a more just and effective response to domestic violence and abuse.

New Hope Midcoast is in its 44th year of operation in Midcoast Maine. Unfortunately, we have seen dramatic increases in the need for services, but due to reduced or stagnant funding levels, we've had to manage the increase in volume with reduced staff.

Over the last 4 years, we have seen a 36% increase in client interactions or nearly 6,800 individual contacts in FY24. These contacts consist of in-person meetings, online contacts or helpline calls with victims or concerned others. Our 24/7 helpline is staffed by highly trained staff advocates and volunteers. We rely on volunteers to assist with helpline coverage.

However, although we've seen an increase in helpline calls over the last four years, we've seen a 26% decrease in volunteer hours to assist with this volume. This percentage translates to a decrease of 1,515 hours of direct service volunteer hours in FY24 alone. Fewer volunteer hours put a greater demand on our staff advocates as we strive to cover our 24/7 helpline. The lack of additional support has increased the workload for staff, increased burnout, and had a significant impact on retention.

In FY24, we provided legal advocacy services to 625 survivors, which represents a 26% increase over the last four years. These services include providing critical support for survivors

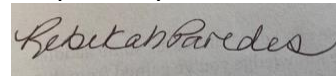
navigating parental rights and responsibilities and divorce cases, as well as assistance with completing Protection from Abuse Orders and court accompaniment in final hearings, helping survivors through those proceedings. We've provided this additional support with level staffing in this program, but that is not sustainable.

Additionally, we are all aware that there is a significant housing crisis in Maine. This is no different in the Midcoast. In fact, Knox County was named one of the least affordable counties to live in Maine. Amidst this crisis, we have had to expand our Residential Service Program, which provides rental subsidies, assistance with housing stability and case management. We have experienced an increase in families that we work with from 6 to 28 families in scattered site units within each county we serve. Through this program, there are 28 adults and 59 children, totaling 87 individuals, who rely on us for safe and stable housing. A continuation of flat funding would directly impact our ability to sustain this work and the safety and stability for everyone we are currently serving in this program.

Although we've seen a steady increase in need in all facets of our work, and in our costs, we have not seen a corresponding increase in funding. Over the last four years, we've had to intentionally eliminate vacant positions in order to redirect these funds to staff salaries as we try to maintain competitive wages in a market with one of the lowest unemployment rates in recent history.

The services and supports that Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers provide are lifesaving and life changing. Our services are an essential component of Maine's safety net for victims of domestic abuse, dating violence and stalking. We know with certainty that our work saves lives. Without needed resources, we will most certainly see an increase in domestic violence-related homicides in the Maine, which is already one of the leading causes of violent death in the state. Please support LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rebekah Paredes", is written over a grey rectangular background.

Rebekah Paredes MS
Executive Director
New Hope Midcoast