

March 11, 2025

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

My name is Rebekah Brown and I work as a rural advocate for Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine.

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

What people know of my job is that I work with survivors of sexual violence, providing them emotional support and offering them resources to meet their basic needs. But that's just one piece of my role as a rural advocate. Every day, I work within my community - with local jails, hospitals, schools, and other agencies to not only help survivors of sexual violence, but build programs in the community to prevent it from happening in the first place.

In jails, I facilitate support groups for survivors of sexual violence and individuals that have been impacted by sexual violence. This wouldn't be possible if I hadn't worked for over a year to build rapport and trust with corrections staff. Jails don't have the resources of prisons and staff are used to resources disappearing. The trust I've built means that they've moved from barely letting me in the door to collaboration in which I support their work and working towards providing them training.

In schools, I teach children from pre-k to high school age-appropriate lessons about topics from boundaries and consent to sexual harassment and dating violence. I coordinate with guidance counselors, teachers, social workers, and even some principals to discover each school's individual challenges, make edits to lessons to fit a school's needs, and then come in to teach students and staff. I support school staff and students whenever there has been an act of sexual violence. We work together to develop ways to keep students safe and I provide emotional support to staff, students, and families.

In rural communities, I work alongside existing resource providers to build collaboration so they can support survivors, and we can support their services. I deliver trainings to staff at community organizations that help bring awareness to and prevent child sexual abuse. In the summer, I teach camp counselors the signs of child sexual abuse and how to handle these situations when they arise.

All of this work I can only do because of the time and care I have taken to build these relationships. The trust I have built in my community through that is not easily replaceable. The work is incredibly difficult some days, but I take so much pride in what I've accomplished.

I love my job and the work I do, but I cannot live off of the pay. I don't make enough money to pay a mortgage or rent on top of providing daycare, food, and basic necessities for my children. My children and I live with my mother – that's the only option I have on this salary. The people I work with inspire me and working with the community to end sexual violence gives my life immense purpose – but it doesn't pay the bills.

I've seen wonderful advocates leave the job for higher paid positions at less fulfilling jobs because they need to feed their families, keep the heat on, and deal with ever-rising prices. Those that leave don't do it because they want to, they do it because they have to.

Each advocate that leaves this work takes their connections, the trust, and the resources that they have built and that survivors and our community depends on. Increasing wages would enable them to continue this incredible work, serving existing survivors and preventing future sexual violence. Our hope is that one day, when sexual violence doesn't affect about 1/3 of our population, we'll be out of the job. But, while sexual violence exists, we need to pay our advocates what they're due to continue to fight against this epidemic.

Thank you for your time and support!