

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

My name is Kathy White Walker, I am a resident of Oakland Maine and am the former Executive Director of Rape Response Services, the sexual assault support center serving Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties.

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

During my years leading Rape Response Services, I witnessed firsthand the tireless work of our advocates—dedicated, highly trained professionals who provide 24-hour crisis support, prevention education, and essential services to survivors of sexual violence.

These advocates serve not only survivors but also their families, partners, and communities. They show up at hospitals in the middle of the night, walk survivors through daunting legal systems, and work every day to prevent future violence through education.

This work is emotionally taxing and complex. Advocates undergo extensive training and build expertise over time, yet their wages have never reflected the skill, commitment, and emotional labor required. While our communities expect—and desperately need—these services, the people providing them often earn less than they would in entry-level retail or food service jobs.

As a leader, one of my greatest challenges was staff retention. Every year, we lost talented, experienced advocates—not because they didn't love the work, but because they could not afford to stay. Many left for jobs that paid a living wage, taking with them years of expertise and trusted relationships with survivors and community partners. The constant turnover strained the remaining staff, disrupted services, and weakened our collective impact.

The situation has only grown worse. According to recent data, more than 60% of advocates in Maine left their positions in 2023, many shortly after the Legislature failed to fund this critical bill. Without action, we risk losing even more skilled professionals, further destabilizing these essential services that survivors rely on every day.

Supporting LD 117 is not just about wages; it is about sustainability. It is about ensuring that sexual assault survivors in Maine—our neighbors, friends, and family members—receive the support they need from trained professionals who can afford to stay in this work. It is about valuing the safety, dignity, and well-being of our communities.

I urge you to pass LD 117 and finally provide the funding needed to pay these advocates a fair, livable wage. It is long overdue. Survivors deserve better, and so do the people who dedicate their lives to supporting them.

Thank you for your time and consideration.