



Sisters in Arms Center
From Our Home to Theirs
Emergency Housing for Military Sexual Trauma Survivors
P.O. Box 5661 Augusta, ME 04330
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207-281-1780

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

My name is Rebecca Cornell du Houx and I am the executive director of the Sisters in Arms Center, which provides housing and services to veterans, their children and military sexual trauma survivors. I am submitting testimony in support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

Sometimes, I think we forget what we are *truly* advocating for; we forget what we are *really* fighting for. In the whirlwind of politics and talking points, we overlook the *actual* details that demonstrate the *real* importance of the work that is done. We must *really* remember the importance of why it's so imperative to have sexual violence advocates.

I grew up in a small rural town. I had a good friend who lived with her foster father, and I would walk over to visit her home. Her foster father repeatedly assaulted myself and six or seven other girls in my friend group. We were all seventh or eighth grade.

Her foster father was caught, and we were interviewed by law enforcement in the school's principals office. I remember being asked very detailed questions about 'how long did he touch you...or how long would he have you...' I was so embarrassed by the questions that I primarily responded with a shrug of my shoulder and 'not that long.' I just wanted the interview to be over and said the bare minimum to answer the questions.

Five years later, I joined the military. I was suddenly in a world dominated by animalist comments about my body, was sexually assaulted and harassed as if it was the norm; it was 'just how it is' and the expectation was that you would 'deal with it' if you wanted to serve. I learned methods of deflecting the harassment and have multiple times had to prevent situations that would have led to rape.

I have wondered how it would have been different if there was a strong and sincere advocate by my side during these formative years. I think I would have *truly known* and *actually believed* it wasn't my fault had there been an advocate solely there for support. Instead, it has taken decades for me to really internalize, believe and understand that the circumstances were far beyond my control.

It wasn't until recently – 15-20 years later- that I became immersed in the sexual assault advocacy work. Within the past three years - through the work on the Governor's

Advisory Council to the National Guard on Military Sexual Trauma - I have meant some truly remarkable and dedicated advocates.

When I meant Melissa Martin from MECASA, it was the first time I felt the comfort of someone actually understanding the fear and shame associated with sexual violence. It was the first time I truly believed a civilian understood the toxicity of sexual violence in military systems. It was the first time I knew of someone digging into and thoroughly learning military law to advocate effectively. It was the first time I felt the weight of advocacy didn't rest solely on myself. She has placed a ton of time and effort into truly understanding military culture and law. I will be forever grateful for the work Melissa has done for military sexual trauma survivors.

The first time the Governors Advisory Council on Military Sexual Trauma met, Elizabeth Ward Saxl, Executive Director of MECASA, was such a fierce advocate at a table and in a room that was full of military uniformed personnel. There were strong tensions between the military and survivors of military sexual trauma who had testified in front of the VLA committee at the time. With her unwavering voice, Elizabeth cut through the tension and showed survivors, including myself, that people really do care and believe in them. She is one of the most admirable people I know. This funding would allow me (the Sisters in Arms Center) to work closely with MECASA to continue to guarantee the future of the Sisters in Arms Center so military sexual trauma survivors will always have a safe place to go.

Recently, Donna Strickler, Executive Director of the Sexual Assault Crisis and Support Center in Winthrop, gave me a tour of the facility. I couldn't help wishing that I knew about the support center as a young girl and early in my military career. I am still in the military service, and we talked about my upcoming deployment to the Middle East. Donna reassured me that she would be certain that the Sisters in Arms Center would stay open if I didn't return. There is no one else I would trust more with the future of the Sisters in Arms Center than the dedicated leaders and advocates of MECASA and the Sexual Assault Crisis and Support Centers.

Sometimes we forget what we are fighting for; we forget the impact that people have on our lives- in this case advocates. In my journey, the direct services as a young girl and young adult severely lacked, especially in rural Maine and in the military. Although this was years ago and sexual violence awareness is greater now, it is clear we have a long way to go- and we can't get there without funding. I am forever grateful to MECASA for their strong dedicated work. I also wish that I didn't have to wait decades to have such amazing people in my corner, showing me how much they care.

I strongly urge you to remember the hope that these services give survivors; to remember that there are survivors throughout the state right now who need the loyalty of advocates in their corner to ease their suffering.

Thank you for all you do- I am happy to take any questions.

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LD 117

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