

Benjamin Collings  
Portland  
LD 117

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committee,

I am Benjamin Collings, residing in Portland.

Why am I here to support this legislation? Mostly for two reasons. One being what I have learned serving in the Maine Legislature for eight years. The other is because I know far too many people, mostly women, but also some men who have had their lives upended due to the issue we are here to discuss today.

While serving in the legislature, specifically on the Appropriations Committee and going through every line of our state budget, I was always perplexed by how little we spend on helping deal with the sexual assault crisis that devastates such a high percentage of women and girls, as well as smaller percent of men and boys - statistics that are still deeply troubling considering a huge amount of under reporting due to shame and stigma. For this issue that impacts such a great number of Mainers, it is quite concerning how little we spend on helping those survivors and give so little in resources to those assisting survivors. I find this to be one of the most disproportionate areas in our state budget, something I don't say lightly as I know there are so many critical, unmet needs.

I do recall one session we used Tobacco Settlement funding to provide funding to bolster survivor support services, which I was grateful for, but thought we shouldn't be raiding that fund, we should rather just add a new line item in the biennial budget, make ongoing and with indexing. I have been alarmed for years at how low of a priority this has been. I understand that some issues are sensitive to talk about and it took us years to more openly discuss the HIV epidemic, and the often co-occurring crises of mental health and substance abuse. All issues that become more common to discuss and find funding for. Yet with advocates for sexual assault for years speaking out about a crisis and with many people speaking out this past decades on high profile predators such as Harvey Weisnten, I am still surprised we don't see more attention and more resources proposed for helping the very survivors we are here to talk about.

All the while organizations helping these survivors have been at threat of closing down or not having enough to pay competitive salaries. I have spoken with staff who were in tears worrying about being able to provide services. This is shameful. Maine must do better.

We all know people who have been impacted by this awful crisis. People who had their childhood, education, careers, relationships ruined or greatly complicated. That is also why I want to urge you to support and prioritize this legislation. I want you to do it for far too many people who are suffering in our state. Like a homeless woman I know who has been to prison, become an addict, lost her children, and struggles to survive on the street. Another person I know who was always there for others, who died way too young in part to a poor lifestyle after years of awful abuse and people ignoring her. As well as a former constituent who is trying to get their life in order and told me that without MECASA they don't know how they ever would have moved forward to begin to heal. So after working on this issue last year and knowing how much people wanted me to fight for this legislation, including staying an extra month after session ended without compensation to work on getting this funded off the appropriation table, I was quite distressed to know it never ultimately received funding.

With that said, the need is still there and while the legislature and governor failed last year to make this a priority, I am asking you today to remedy that, to be champions of this legislation .

The survivors and advocates need a hero. I believe actually there could be 186 heroes in this building, so please all do this together. You will be glad you did.