

Testimony of Beth White
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989

In Support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Response Services
Sponsored by Senator Jill Duson

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human Services,
Thursday, March 20, 2025 at 1pm, Cross Office Building Room 209

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, I'm Beth White, Director of Politics and Legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. The Maine Service Employees Association represents over 13,000 workers across the state, including the workers at Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine (SARSSM).

We support LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Response Services and want to thank Senator Duson and all cosponsors for introducing this legislation.

The work done by sexual assault advocates and other workers in this field is critical. Sexual assault response advocates have challenging and complex jobs that vary significantly from day to day. They work with survivors who are experiencing one of the most difficult times of their lives, providing support and helping them navigate the days, weeks, months and years after an assault. As you can imagine, the types of support advocates provide varies from survivor to survivor. Not only is the work itself challenging, but experiencing so much secondary trauma can lead to physical and mental health impacts for many workers. Regardless of what tasks their day brings, their work is always related to sexual violence in some fashion, which is emotionally taxing.

Current funding levels do not provide a living wage for advocates. This leads to burnout and turnover. Many advocates take second jobs to make ends meet, which only adds to the risk of burnout. Additionally, workers are often required to be on call for the State Helpline outside of their typical work hours and are only paid a small stipend for doing so. Organizations like SARSSM are already struggling to retain advocates. If this funding is not increased, staffing challenges will continue across the state since wages will remain too low to recruit and retain workers. This places an even larger burden on remaining advocates, who work hard with few resources to help vulnerable Mainers. We encourage you to take time to read the testimonies submitted by advocates, who have a deep understanding of where and how these cuts would be detrimental to their work.

The advocates at agencies like SARSSM are doing incredibly difficult and essential work. Maine cannot afford to continue underfunding these critical services. Advocates are leaving the field far

too often, whether due to understaffing, low pay, or burnout. We need to ensure that organizations who provide sexual assault response services have the funding required to not only provide services, but to ensure their workers can be paid a living wage. Please vote “ought to pass” on LD 117. Thank you for your consideration.