



April 28, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Elizabeth Ward Saxl, and I am offering testimony today on behalf of the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA), the organization which represents and serves Maine's sexual violence prevention and response programs as well as Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers. MECASA initiates and advocates for victim-centered public policy; provides expert training, technical assistance, and resources for providers and partners; and funds the service providers in your communities.

I provided testimony in person neither for nor against LD 1395, "An Act Regarding Human Trafficking Prevention Instruction and Dissemination of and Access to Obscene Material in Schools," but at that time had not had the opportunity seek a vote of our providers on position. **However, in line with what I shared with the committee, they ultimately did vote for a neither for nor against position, expressing concerns about sections 1 and 2 of the bill (which focus on obscenity) and supporting section 3, with the suggestion that the committee consider amending the existing law (MRS Title 20-A, §254 sub 18) related to child sexual abuse prevention. In addition, I am following up with the information I mentioned during the hearing.**

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Committee

Over the past year, a diverse group of experts, service providers, systems partners, and survivors came together to examine Maine's response to the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), as directed by LD 1092, *A Resolve to Establish an Ad Hoc Committee to Address the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*. This legislation, passed by Maine's 131st Legislature, recognized the urgent need for a coordinated, statewide approach to preventing and responding to CSEC, which refers to the sexual exploitation of minors for profit, including child sex trafficking. In response, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and MECASA co-convened a coalition that brought deep knowledge of youth services, healthcare, education, housing, and the

justice system. Through months of research, collaboration, and community engagement, we developed a set of comprehensive recommendations designed to reflect the realities young people face and the gaps in our current systems. While the report is still in the final stages of Department review, what I'll share with you today draws directly from that collective effort—grounded in expertise, guided by experience, and built to create real, lasting change.

Survivors and other experts agree that CSEC is a pervasive issue in Maine, and formal research on CSEC is limited, partially because it requires specialized expertise to engage with survivors in unconventional settings.¹ However, existing information reveals concerning trends. For instance, while there is limited formal research, one study conducted in Portland showed that nearly one in four homeless youth in Portland have been offered drugs in exchange for sex, and a similar number have been asked to have sex with strangers for payment.² Those dynamics meet the federal definition of human trafficking.³ **Maine's sexual assault support centers identified 367 minor survivors of CSEC between 2018 and 2023, with 41% being minors aged 6 to 13.⁴ Despite these numbers, Maine's law enforcement data shows shockingly low levels of reported trafficking—only three human trafficking arrests in 2023⁵—highlighting how these crimes often go undetected.** Furthermore, nearly 40% of Maine law enforcement officers have encountered trafficking situations, yet fewer than half believe their departments are equipped to handle cases involving minors.⁶ These statistics highlight the urgent need for enhanced prevention and intervention measures to promote healing and wellness for survivors in Maine while ensuring accountability for those who cause harm.

Maine law requires that certain professionals, including teachers, healthcare providers, and first responders, must report any knowledge or suspicion of child abuse and neglect to DHHS and the

¹ Barnert, E., Iqbal, Z., Bruce, J., Anoshiravani, A., Kolhatkar, G., & Greenbaum, J. (2017). Commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of children and adolescents: A narrative review. *Academic Pediatrics*, 17(8), 825. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2017.07.009>

² McLaughlin, T. and Cameron D. (2012). Sex exploitation and trafficking among youth utilizing services at Preble Street Teen Center.

³ 22 USC §78

⁴ Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault. (2023).

⁵ State of Maine Department of Public Safety. (n.d.) Crime in Maine.

<https://www.maine.gov/dps/msp/about/maine-crime>

⁶ Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc. (2015). Maine human trafficking needs assessment.

https://www.mainesten.org/uploads/4/4/3/6/44365787/hza_me_htna_final_for_print_01062015.pdf

relevant District Attorney's Office, and they must complete a mandated reporter training approved by DHHS every four years.⁷ One effective and straightforward step that Maine can take to better prepare communities to respond to CSEC is to require that all department-approved mandated reporter curricula include a module that discusses the dynamics and indicators of CSEC. In doing so, we can ensure that all mandated reporters in the state receive clear, consistent, and evidence-based information about CSEC, including how to report it and where to access community-based resources.

Another tangible, high-impact step Maine can take to combat CSEC is integrating a dedicated CSEC module in the child sexual abuse prevention education curriculum described under 20-A MRS §254 sub-§18 (2-3). This content should provide adults, such as caregivers and school personnel, with the tools to recognize signs of exploitation while emphasizing the importance of connection, respect, consent, access to resources, and supportive, nonjudgmental relationships between adults and youth. Additionally, it is crucial that these educational sessions are accessible to all students, including those who with developmental disabilities, who are often removed from such discussions.⁸ By ensuring all students receive this vital information, we can foster a safer community that is better equipped to prevent CSEC.

And finally, I wanted to remind you of the resources I mentioned the Maine Sex Trafficking and Exploitation Network (www.mainesten.org) and the Maine Network of Children's Advocacy Centers (www.cacmaine.org) which are places to learn more.

Thank you for your consideration and allowing us to weigh in on this important legislation.

⁷ 22 MRS §4011-A

⁸ Online MSW Programs. (n.d.) Advocating for inclusive sex education for students with disabilities.

<https://www.onlinemswprograms.com/resources/inclusive-sex-ed-students-with-disabilities/#:~:text=Sometimes%2C%20disabilities%20are%20not%20obvious,around%20sexuality%2C%E2%80%9D%20she%20said>

About Maine's Sexual Assault Service Providers

One in five Mainers will experience sexual assault at some point in their lifetime. Each year, 19,000 Mainers will experience sexual violence.⁹

Maine's [sexual violence service providers](#) provide free and confidential services across the state to victims/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault and those close to them, as well as to individuals who wish to increase their understanding of the issues. Just some of the services include a 24-hour statewide sexual assault helpline, crisis intervention and information, support groups, in-person accompaniment and advocacy through the medical and legal systems, and school- and community-based prevention education. Services are provided for a victim/survivor regardless of when they experienced sexual violence, and regardless of what type of sexual violence they experienced. Types of sexual violence include, but are not limited to, sexual harassment and gender-based bullying, child sexual abuse, elder sexual abuse, stalking, sex trafficking, and sexual violence within an intimate partner relationship.

24/7 Confidential

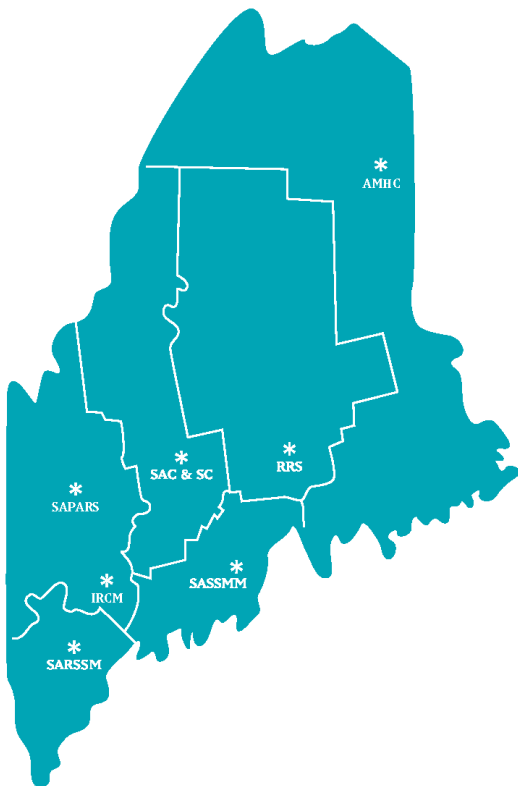
Maine Sexual Assault Helpline: [1-800-871-7741](tel:1-800-871-7741)

⁹ Murray, C., Dumont, R & Shaler, G. (2022). *Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities*. Maine Statistical Analysis Center. University of Southern Maine.

mecasa

MAINE COALITION AGAINST
SEXUAL ASSAULT

info@mecasa.org | mecasa.org
207-626-0034



STATEWIDE
SEXUAL ASSAULT HELPLINE
1-800-871-7741

Free. Private. 24/7.

MAINE'S SEXUAL ASSAULT SUPPORT CENTERS

AMHC Sexual Assault Services (AMHC)

Serving Androscoggin, Hancock, & Washington Counties •
amhcsas.org

Immigrant Resource Center of Maine

Serving Androscoggin & Cumberland Counties • ircofmaine.org

Rape Response Services (RRS)

Serving Penobscot & Piscataquis Counties • rrsonline.org

Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Services (SAPARS)

Serving Androscoggin, Oxford & Franklin Counties and the towns of
Bridgton & Harrison • sapars.org

Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center (SAC & SC)

Serving Kennebec & Somerset Counties • silentnomore.org

Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine (SARSSM)

Serving Cumberland & York Counties • sarssm.org

Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM)

Serving Eastern Cumberland, Sagadahoc, Knox, Waldo & Lincoln
Counties • sassmm.org

MORE SEXUAL VIOLENCE SERVICES

Maine TransNet • mainetrans.net • info@mainetransnet.org

Wabanaki Women's Coalition • wabanakiwomenscoalition.org
207-763-3478

Aroostook Band of Micmacs, Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center • 207-551-3639

Houlton Band of Maliseets, Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center • 207-532-6401

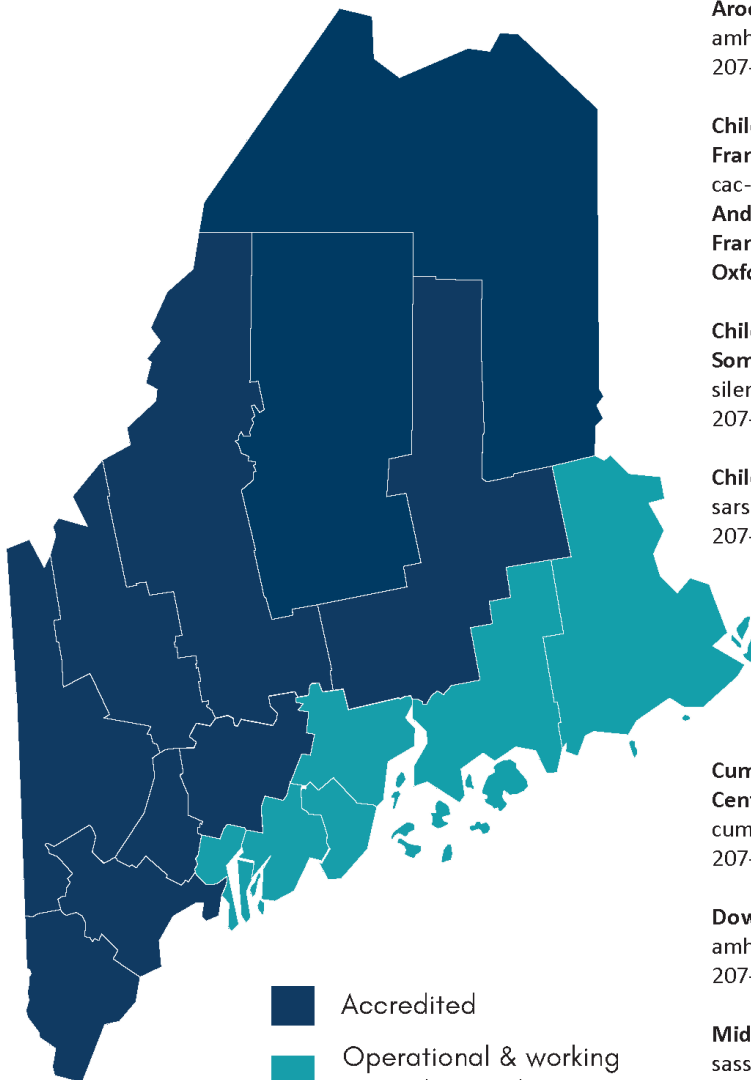
Indian Township Passamaquoddy, Domestic & Sexual
Violence Advocacy Center • 207-214-1917

Passamaquoddy Peaceful Relations • 1-877-853-2613

Penobscot Indian Nation, Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center • 207-631-4886



Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers



■ Accredited
■ Operational & working
toward accreditation

Aroostook County Children's Advocacy Center
amhcsas.org
207-472-6134

**Children's Advocacy Center of Androscoggin,
Franklin, and Oxford Counties**
cac-afo.org
Androscoggin: 207-784-0436
Franklin: 207-778-9777
Oxford: 207-739-1228

**Children's Advocacy Center of Kennebec &
Somerset Counties**
silentnomore.org/about-our-cac
207-861-4491

Children's Advocacy Center of York County
sarsmm.org
207-459-2380

**Cumberland County Children's Advocacy
Center**
cumberlandcountycac.org
207-879-6160

Downeast Children's Advocacy Center
amhcsas.org
207-255-3687

Midcoast Children's Advocacy Center
sassmm.org
207-522-7162

Penquis Children's Advocacy Center
penquiscac.org
207-974-2469