



Richard A. Bennett
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THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

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**Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs on
LD 2212, An Act Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations
from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State
Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the
Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June
30, 2026 and June 30, 2027**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine. I am here today to testify on Section 000 of LD 2212, the Governor's supplemental budget bill.

Just a month ago, in her State of the State speech Governor Mills told this Legislature: "You want to protect women and girls? Then fully fund healthcare for women and girls, and fully fund domestic violence shelters, and fully fund sexual assault services if you really want to protect women and girls." I wholeheartedly agree – let's fully fund sexual assault services.

There are six nationally recognized pillars of sexual assault reform, including tracking, inventory, and mandatory testing of rape kits. Maine is the only state in the nation that hasn't enacted *any* of these reforms. That is a shameful distinction for our state. Survivors have a reasonable belief that their kit will be tested for DNA evidence. For too long, that has not been guaranteed. With this language and the accompanying funding, we are taking the first steps to change that. As the sponsor of LD 754 and cosponsor of LD 1816, I applaud this.

However, I want to caution that the level of funding established in the Governor's proposal is inadequate to the commitment. The long history of this issue along with the significant publicity accompanying this failure of justice has rendered the fiscal note obsolete. Technology costs planned in this budget are inadequate, and there has been a 40% increase in kits coming to the State Crime Lab due to public expectations that kits will be tracked and tested. Please ask the experts at the Maine State Police and at the sexual assault advocacy agencies like MECASA for their updated guidance on funding. Please do not underfund this initiative. It would be tragic to finally promise justice without funding fully the means to deliver it.

Funding sexual assault kit tracking is a meaningful step. However, kit tracking is only one part of the system that survivors rely on.

The advocates that work in our state's sexual assault support centers ensure that survivors can navigate medical care, law enforcement, and the legal process. If we fund a tracking system, these advocates will be the ones who ensure that survivors can access it.

Last year, LD 117, which I cosponsored was amended to provide only one-time funding to sexual assault support centers to increase the salaries of advocates from \$32,000 to \$45,000. Turnover in support centers dropped from a high of 60% to a low of 15%. This investment stabilized this critical workforce that survivors depend on.

However, that was one-time funding. Next year, support centers are going to have to dramatically cut advocates' salaries or lay off highly trained staff. In either case, we are looking at a workforce crisis right as we are funding a system that requires trained professionals to guide survivors through it. If Maine cares about protecting women and girls, this is unacceptable.

In addition to funding the exam kit tracking system, I urge you to make this critical funding for advocates' salaries ongoing.

I agree with the Governor: if we want to protect women and support survivors, then we need to *fully* fund real support for survivors statewide.