

mecasa

MAINE COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT

March 21, 2023

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

My name is Elizabeth Ward Saxl and I am submitting 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.

MECASA is here today in support LD 564, "An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services." Many thanks to Senator Carney for introducing this bill. Our members sexual assault support centers strongly urge you to make this funding ongoing.

Each year, 14,000 Mainers will experience sexual violence.¹ Yet of those 14,000 Mainers, fewer than five percent will make a report to law enforcement. And so, one of the only paths to justice and safety for the thousands of remaining survivors is accessing civil legal protections.

The good news is thanks to the hard work of our friends at Pine Tree Legal Assistance (PTLA), Legal Services for the Elderly (LSE), Maine Equal Justice, and you and prior Legislatures, we have some of the most comprehensive legal protections in the country for victims/survivors of sexual violence. Also in the good news column is that the PTLA attorneys who primarily represent sexual violence victims/survivors are extraordinary – they are deeply knowledgeable about the range of protections available for victims and their practice is sensitive and trauma-informed.

PTLA's attorneys support hundreds of sexual assault survivors every year.

¹ Dumont, R. & Shaler, G. (2015). *Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities*. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine.

They support high school and college students in Title IX issues when they have been sexually assaulted by another student, allowing them to continue attending classes as well as being able to continue with after-school activities such as sports and participate fully in special occasions such as prom and graduation by advocating for specific safety plans to help student survivors continue to fully access their education.

They support tenants from being evicted for refusing to have sex with their landlords.

They support victims with intellectual disabilities to obtain court-ordered protection resulting in their increased safety.

Without civil legal providers, these survivors would be without representation – they would leave school, be evicted, and be subject to continued sexual violence.

The bad news is that many victims are going unrepresented. We need more staff at PTLA to support the many areas where their staffing can't currently reach. For example, our Children's Advocacy Center and sexual assault support center Downeast are working with minors impacted by sexual violence without the same civil attorney resources as other parts of the state. As a result, these student survivors are struggling to continue to attend school.

We also need more attorneys at LSE who are uniquely positioned to support elder victims. We need more staff at the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project to support victims who need T and U-Visas. These needs are not one-time. They are ongoing.

I would also add that my enthusiasm for these service providers is not limited to my work time. My husband Mike and I believe heart and soul in the life changing services these entities provide and as a result make the Campaign for Justice, which funds these agencies, our highest charitable giving priority – at a rate many times more than what we donate to the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault, an organization which we also think does great work.

I would urge you to join us in our commitment to provide ongoing funding to these organizations and would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

About Maine's Sexual Assault Service Providers

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