



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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### *Testimony of Representative Holly B. Stover*

#### *In support of*

#### **LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I am Holly Stover, and I represent the Towns of Boothbay, Boothbay Harbor, Edgecomb, Southport, South Bristol and Westport Island. I am pleased to testify in support of **LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services**.

There is a statewide fiscal crisis that is impacting Maine's Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers. We have all experienced increased inflationary costs in our household budgets and at times, some of us may be challenged to make ends meet. For those individuals who choose to work at Sexual Assault Service Centers, this is exacerbated by extremely low base salaries that have been set primarily due to the amount of state and federal funds these centers receive. We are before you today to address the issues of staff salaries in the Sexual Assault Service Centers and, secondly, to seek funds to expand services for disproportionately impacted populations. You will hear from many people today who will share the impact of the work that they do every day.

In my professional career, I had the opportunity to serve as the state's Director of Domestic and Sexual Violence. This position allowed me to be directly involved in the services and programs offered through Maine's seven Sexual Assault Support Centers and Child Advocacy Centers. As a result, I have developed long-standing professional relationships with these amazing people who do work that some of us don't necessarily think about regularly. They provide a vast array of services that range from prevention with school-aged children to crisis intervention and support to survivors of sexual assault. In addition, they must be on call and available to assist and support survivors who are brought into emergency departments across the state and often stay involved with a person through the long and challenging road to court proceedings.

There are seven Sexual Assault Support Centers in Maine. Of those, only four centers report that their employees can afford their basic needs and monthly bills. I know advocates that qualify for State benefits like SNAP and Mainecare because they are the head of the household for their families. Unfortunately, none of the Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers can offer all staff a livable wage for a two-parent, two-child household. These professionals who give so much of their skills, talents and compassion are in their own crisis situations daily despite working hard and long hours.

Sexual Assault Advocates' pay starts as low as \$33,500. These are people who have intense and complex positions where they are on call and awakened by crisis calls overnight and on the weekends. Any additional per diem increase does not reflect this because it is part of the responsibility of the job.

District 48: Boothbay, Boothbay Harbor, Edgecomb, South Bristol, Southport and Westport Island

Last year, 37% of the advocates left their positions and stated it was because of the pay. This turnover rate is twice the national average. Of the remaining advocates, 70% have indicated they will leave within the next two years. It's essential to note that some are hanging on right now because this legislation is before you and should these increases not be funded; it is clear to me we will lose a significant portion of this workforce.

The other portion of LD 566 addresses the disproportionate impacts of sexual assault on our traditionally marginalized communities. We know that Maine's marginalized communities experience sexual assault at alarmingly higher rates than other communities. Funding will provide support to communities of color, people with developmental disabilities and trans-Mainers with services that are culturally specific, victim-centered and trauma-informed. This bill seeks to provide outreach and services for disproportionately impacted populations through organizations that are trusted allies within their communities.

In addition, this bill provides the mechanism to save the Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers in Maine from complete collapse. It is a critical moment where we cannot question if we can increase the salaries for the Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers. Instead, we must stand collectively and fund these meager salaries in our state.

In closing, I ask that you carefully consider the critical salary and programming for disproportionately impacted communities. I know that you have many compelling situations before you, but I want to emphasize and raise that these services are among the most critical that you will consider in this session.

Thank you for listening and being attentive to the needs of the Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers and the services that are provided to our marginalized communities in Maine.