

SASSMM

Sexual Assault Support Services
of Midcoast Maine

March 27, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Lynne Heartwell, and I'm submitting testimony on behalf of Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM). This testimony is in support of LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

Within SASSMM, I work at a Children's Advocacy Center, which responds to concerns of child sexual abuse. I support caregivers as they come to terms with the trauma their family is going through—and eventually heal. What I think is so special about this role is the impact we have on these caregivers. These caregivers often come in with their own history of sexual abuse and are struggling to understand how their children suffered the same thing. Sometimes they're not ready to process that. Sometimes this manifests as denial that the sexual abuse happened.

The thing about advocacy is that I have to meet people where they're at. If they aren't ready to process their family's trauma, they aren't ready. And I walk alongside them until they're ready. There's no guarantee they'll ever get to that point, and that's okay.

There is one caregiver that epitomizes this process. She'll stay with me forever because of that. She came into the CAC and told me in no uncertain terms that she "doesn't ask for help." Weeks later, she disclosed her own abuse to me, a history she "was planning to take to the grave." And she asked for help. There is something so ugly yet so beautiful in that – how I can help her hold that truth and come to terms with it.

The other thing about advocacy is that I hold these truths, too. And they are *heavy*. It's more common than not that a caregiver will sob their heart out in front of me. And I have to hold that grief for them so that they can find their strength. But at the end of the day, I'm just another person. I love this work and have never had such purpose—but I've also never held such grief and fatigue.

For this work to be sustainable, we need wages to reflect just how much we hold. As we say within SASSMM, "the body keeps the score," or our bodies hold onto this grief. It affects us physically and emotionally long after it's happened. Sometimes I can't sleep because all I can think about is every caregiver who's cried in front of me. How they sounded. Where are they now? Are they happy? Did I do right by them?

I've had to re-enroll in therapy because of this, not to mention that I have numerous chronic health conditions that are worsened by this work. "Worsened" being to the point of having to go to the emergency room for them. The cost of that visit was more than my fiancé and I have in our savings. Like I said, I love this work—but I simply cannot stay in this work if I don't have wages that can cover all the extra medical expenses that come about from it.

This is not even mentioning the resignation wave that SASSMM was just hit with. Almost a third of our staff have left since October. This work isn't sustainable for anyone as it is, no matter how rewarding it can be. And the less sustainable this work is, the worse off survivors are.

Thank you for reading this and for your support on this bill. I—and all of my colleagues—truly appreciate it.

Sincerely,
Lynne Heartwell