



Testimony of Lucia Chomeau Hunt, Esq.

Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.

**Speaking in Support of LD 556 "An Act To Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services"
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services**

Date of Public Hearing: March 27, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Lucia Chomeau Hunt. I am the directing attorney of Family Law and Victim Rights at Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc., and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today in support of LD 566.

I have been asked to share the perspective of Pine Tree Legal Assistance on these issues and I am speaking today on behalf of Pine Tree Legal Assistance (Pine Tree). Pine Tree is a nonprofit organization with offices in Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor, Machias, and Presque Isle. Since 1967, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has provided free legal services to low-income people throughout the State of Maine.

Attorneys in Pine Tree's statewide Family Law and Victim Rights unit represent survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. In 2022, we represented survivors in 1,333 cases, primarily Protection from Abuse, family matters, and other civil legal cases related to the violence they have experienced.

Since 1978, Pine Tree has had a dedicated attorney on staff focusing on Protection from Abuse cases. Over time, increased funding has allowed Pine Tree to expand the geographic scope and types of legal advocacy for victim/survivors to our current statewide programming for victims of sexual assault as well as a variety of grants and subgrants that prioritize representation of victims of domestic violence. Unfortunately, the funding for sexual assault advocates has not kept pace with Pine Tree's expanded legal services.

Pine Tree's survivor-centered legal programming is based in a model of close collaboration with victim services advocates. We accept referrals directly from advocates in the Child Advocacy Centers and sexual assault crisis and support centers across the state. Under the largest grant that supports Pine Tree's work with survivors, we prioritize representing parents or caregivers whose children have been interviewed at Child Advocacy Centers (CACs). It is particularly difficult

for parents to navigate the family court system when a child has been sexually abused. It is essential to our effective legal representation that survivors and families are connected to the range of supportive services provided by advocates.

Pine Tree attorneys work closely with advocates during the legal process, and often refer clients to advocates for further support at the conclusion of our legal services. Our representation of survivors would not be nearly as efficient or effective without the advocate partners who work alongside Pine Tree attorneys in these cases.

Advocates provide support, help survivors navigate complex decisions, evaluate options, accompany survivors at court, connect survivors with resources, and provide information so that survivors can make informed decisions. The advocates that we work with every day are compassionate, dedicated, and truly make a difference for victim/survivors facing the most difficult moments of their lives. Advocate services also provide direct benefits to other systems, like the courts, by supporting survivors, connecting them with legal representation, and helping them to understand and navigate the legal system.

I urge you to support funding for these critical resources. Thank you Senator Duson and your co-sponsors, as well as this Committee, for your commitment to survivors of sexual abuse and the advocates who support them. I am happy to answer any questions.