



March 27, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Fatuma Hussein and I'm executive director of the Immigrant Resource Center Of Maine (IRCM), the only comprehensive culturally and linguistically specific sexual and domestic violence resource center in Maine.

Since 2009, IRCM has been providing culturally specific sexual violence services including advocacy, education and direct victim services such as safety planning, court accompaniment, interpreter and cultural broker services, transportation, medical accompaniment, support groups, referral services for immigration, mental health, medical, housing, financial support and much more.

Refugees, Asylum seekers and Immigrants survivors are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. In fact, many of us come from war torn countries. Thus, sexual violence is a weapon of war. Many of you in this room would not relate to this but I do.

We share the risks of all survivors in the United States to sexual violence although we experience increased vulnerabilities and isolation to its effects because of our cultural context in which we experience violence and of course barriers to accessing services. To ensure seamless services and increased access to sexual violence services, IRCM employs Multilingual and Multicultural Victim Advocates. This approach erases cultural and linguistic barriers.

Sexual violence is in every community. It has NO color, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, economic status, or age. It takes on many forms and can occur throughout the life cycle. Examples of sexual violence include female genital mutilation; physical, verbal and psychological abuse; elder abuse; sex trafficking, sexual coercion and forced marriage.

Many refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants come from war torn countries where sexual violence laws and protections do not exist. Under many African countries and traditions, sexual violence often goes unpunished and underreported. Many of these cultures have the Elder System that is responsible for making decisions within their respective clans and tribes. It is shameful and a taboo to report rape, and/or any sexual abuse in many African cultures.

In Maine, our community has a long way to go to address sexual violence. Although there are significant barriers to accessing resources to support culturally sensitive services, there is also a glimpse of hope. The immigrant resource center and its sister agencies work tirelessly every day to meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence to provide wide range of services.

In the last fiscal year, IRCM has provided sexual violence services to hundreds of survivors. And the credit goes to our wonderful, courageous, and resilient Advocates. Every day, they provide sexual violence services in 10 or more languages. Not only do they provide hope for our communities by changing a very rigid belief system, but they also must teach this system how to be fair regardless of the culture, skin color, language, immigration status and ethnicity.

Imagine if we paid our Victim Advocates fairly. Imagine if we acknowledge the work, they do every day to enhance a community free of sexual violence. Imagine if ALL have the right to their bodies. Imagine if we had a world free of female genital mutilation.

That is exactly what this movement does every single day. For many years, sexual violence staff have been underpaid. We are here today to be heard, to be seen, and to be acknowledged. The work we do every day is extremely difficult. We serve people when their innocence has been taken away without their consent. We serve children to help heal them so that they can once again believe in this world.

We are the change makers. We are the hope. We heal people. We believe in survivors.

I strongly urge you to support this funding request, LD 566, “An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault”. This bill is critical to the safety and well-being of our staff and survivors in our State.

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