

March 27, 2023

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

My name is Jodi Leach, I am a resident of Blue Hill and a Sexual Assault Client Services Advocate/SART Coordinator. I am submitting testimony in support of LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

I have been a sexual assault advocate since completing the Help in Healing Advocate Training in October of 1999. I have stayed in this work as it has my heart – and because I have a family that has financially ‘picked up the slack’ so I can continue to support the most vulnerable in our communities.

Advocates work 40 hour weeks and then must also dedicate at least two 24-hour shifts to cover our 24/7 helpline. Our day often doesn’t end at 5 pm - we walk out the door and are still hypervigilant with our phone. Being on-call can often double our time (hours and hours of our lives and time with our families) dedicated to sexual assault services every week. It impacts what we can do and where we can go after hours, weekends, and holidays. I have walked out on my family at dinner, school concerts, and sporting events. I have left a cart of groceries to go sit in my car and listen as someone pours out their heart about abuse that happened 2 hours ago or 20 years ago. I’ve been called out in the middle of the night to drive more than 2 hours away to support someone for hours and hours while they go through a forensic exam after experiencing sexual violence. In one recent and not unusual week, I had 23 client interactions between Monday and Saturday – ranging from a DHHS team meeting, a face-to-face conversation with a college student, talking to a therapist about available resources for a child whose parent was recently in the news for child pornography charges, to multiple helpline calls supporting survivors. And until just a few years ago, I was doing this work for \$14.65 an hour.

Those I have supported over the years have ranged in age from under 2 years old up to age 88 – survivors working through feelings like hurt, anger, guilt, shame, terror, embarrassment, and numbness. My fellow advocates and I have accompanied them to court (supporting them before, during and after), family team meetings at DHHS, Children’s Advocacy Centers, and schools to deal with the aftermath of sexual assault and sexual abuse. I have one client, abused by her father at 14 years old, who is STILL waiting, with her life on hold, for ‘justice’ through the judicial system - at the age of 22. I support individuals in our local jail that are there for substance use crimes – whose experiences of childhood sexual abuse are at the core of why they began using in the first place. Most have never had anyone they could share their horrendous experiences with, at the time or since, so they could HEAL from the trauma. They deserve to heal. I supported a minor 20 years ago that circled back into our services as an adult still concerned over the safety of themselves and a now-grown child that was a product of that childhood sexual abuse. She is so grateful I am still her advocate.

My position is unique – I have seen so much turnover through the years – seeing phenomenal advocates leave because they need to take care of themselves and their families with work that provides more time and money. This work impacts your soul 24/7. Vicarious trauma is real. There are sexual assault advocates that are getting paid less than employees at McDonalds or Dunkin Donuts – jobs that are much less emotionally taxing and with better hours. Advocates have been with **your** family, friends, and community members at their lowest, most vulnerable moments, at the expense of our own financial stability, mental health, and connections with our friends and families.

This work is difficult, underappreciated, and undercompensated, but also **the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my life**. I have witnessed so much healing and thriving from survivors over the years – and I’m proud to know I had some part in that process. I’m often asked how I could do what I do for so many years. The real question is: How could I not?

I want to thank the committee for taking the time to hear my voice and know that I represent many that have left this work, and I hope you hear that we deserve to be shown the value of what we do by increasing the starting pay scale. Please support LD 566 and vote in favor of it.