

RAPE RESPONSE SERVICES

SUPPORT, EDUCATE, PREVENT

March 27, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Amanda Chambers and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of Rape Response Services and the Penquis Children's Advocacy Center in support of **LD 816, An Act to Provide Integrated Behavioral Health Services to Sexual Violence Survivors**.

Rape Response Services is the sexual assault support center that provides services to those impacted by sexual violence throughout Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties. We provide 24/7 accompaniments and helpline services, support groups, and referrals for services that survivors rely on for healing, safety, or justice. All of our services are free and available to survivors throughout their lifetime, regardless of the type of assault or how long ago the assault occurred.

The Penquis Children's Advocacy Center is a child-focused, facility-based, multidisciplinary team approach to the investigation of child sexual abuse. By design the child's needs are at the center of the response. As a primary function of this model, the CAC often makes referrals for the child and non-offending caregivers to outside support services such as counseling.

When someone experiences sexual violence, there are critical opportunities for intervention which can support resilience and promote healing. For the survivor to be heard and believed, to have autonomy and choice over their body and their story, and to have access to trauma informed services, are critical aspects to healing.

The survivors whom we support are experiencing long waitlists for behavioral health services that are delaying their healing. Our CAC has linkage agreements with two major providers of clinical services in our catchment area. When the CAC makes a referral, the agency prioritizes that referral and moves the child to the top of their waitlist. Even with these linkage agreements, children referred by the CAC are still waiting approximately six months before their first appointment with a therapist. They must wait at least six long months after they have told their story and had their whole world turned upside down, before they are able to access therapy to help them process what has happened and begin to heal.

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This is still much better than the wait times for the adult survivors Rape Response Services supports, who are unable to benefit from CAC linkage agreements. Adult survivors experience even longer wait times, sometimes up to a year.

After speaking with our colleagues from other centers across the state, we realize this is a crisis that everyone is experiencing when referring survivors to community agencies for clinical services and a problem that is getting worse instead of better. As a result, our helplines and support groups are overwhelmed. Our helpline calls at Rape Response Services have tripled compared to the number of calls we received prior to the pandemic. The types of calls that we are receiving indicate that callers have increased mental health needs. Our advocates and volunteers do not have the skill or training to offer the therapeutic techniques that only clinicians can provide.

By supporting LD 816, you would be giving survivors of all ages access to the critical behavioral health services they need, when they need it, without long waitlists or a complicated referral process.

Thank you for your consideration. We hope you will support LD 816 and would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.