



March 27, 2023

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

My name is Wendy Gilbert and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of the Penquis Children's Advocacy Center (CAC). The Penquis CAC has two locations, one in Bangor and a satellite center at the Dover Foxcroft Police Department. We work with children and families who reside in Penobscot and Piscataquis counties.

I am submitting testimony in support of LD 1092, "An Act to Prevent the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the State."

I have been employed at the Penquis CAC for the last 5 ½ years. I am a certified Forensic Interviewer and manage the day-to-day operations and staffing at the Penquis CAC.

The Penquis CAC is a safe, child-focused place that provides support and services to children and their non-offending caregivers when a child may have experienced sexual abuse. Adhering to an evidence-based model, the CAC convenes a multidisciplinary team (MDT) including representation from the following sectors: law enforcement, child protective services, prosecution, medical, mental health, and victim advocacy. Only law enforcement, child protective services, and the District Attorney's Office may make referrals to the CAC.

The central focus of the CAC experience is a one-time comprehensive forensic interview of the child by a trained, neutral professional. The interview is observed by members of the MDT and is recorded. The value of this single interview cannot be overstated, primarily because it precludes the child having to go through the stress of sharing his or her experience with separate agents through multiple interviews.

The forensic interview provides the child with an opportunity to disclose and talk about the sexual abuse they experienced in a neutral and safe environment. The CAC model helps to

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identify and discuss child sexual abuse in a trauma-informed way, thereby reducing ongoing trauma that could occur later into adulthood.

The identification of the children who are being trafficked looks proportionally different than the average child sexual abuse case. A lot of times these children do not have a protective or an engaged caregiver to support them and thus they are not able to be identified as being trafficked. CSEC cases involve more time in working with the MDT on how to proceed and schedule a forensic interview. It is difficult to get all the MDT at the CAC for the forensic interview as the allegations of CSEC may not always be clear. CSEC survivors require a quicker trauma focused approach in supporting them after they leave the CAC. For some of these children, the exploitation has been happening for years. It is challenging to manage the coordination of additional supports and services for these survivors given the lack of resources, case management and staffing hours.

By supporting LD 1092, you would be giving a voice to these children by providing extra resources to help identify them, a chance for them to speak with a forensic interviewer to talk about their abuse at a CAC and obtain services to promote their healing. Healing starts when there is intervention.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.