

Testimony of Margaret E. McArthur
In Support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
January 2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Margaret McArthur, I am from Ellsworth, and I am writing in support of LD 2084 and the need for funding to maintain essential victim services in Maine.

I am a survivor of domestic violence. On March 27th 2008, I left my abuser of 7 years after he assaulted me in front of my son. My sister drove me from the police department to my local Domestic Violence Resource Center, and from there my life changed. I didn't know the challenges I would be facing, and looking back, I know that without the help of the wonderful people at that agency, I would not be where I am today. I was 23 years old, had a very young child, and had been living with abuse since I was 16. I had been isolated from family and friends, with no phone or car, and until a few months before I had been living in a home where my abuser would sporadically turn off the electricity to "punish" me. I had been living at the mercy of a man who killed my dog because I loved her too much, and made windchimes out of her bones. I couldn't see any way out. I was terrified and I felt like my son and I had no way to get free and nothing would ever change.

But thanks to the dedication and willingness of everyone at that DVRC, I didn't end up back where I started. From the moment they opened the door to me, there was help for whatever challenge I ran into, and if they couldn't help, they found me the resources. They helped me to obtain a protection from abuse order against my abuser, and later helped me with my divorce. They provided support and safety planning when my protection order was due to expire and helped me to obtain an extension for another 2 years. Because of the services and support that they provided, I have been able to rebuild my life, and keep my son safe. They have been steadfast in their support over the past 16+ years. This took on many forms, such as helping me navigate multiple modifications of the custody agreement for my son, finding a safe place for custody exchanges and helping me to make a mandated report because of what my abuser had done. They were with me every step of the way. Because of their support, my son can be himself entirely, without fear of harm from someone that is supposed to have his trust, and I can sleep knowing that we are safe.

Access to domestic violence services and court- based advocates helps survivors navigate the complex process of the civil and criminal justice system, without which they're lost in the metaphorical woods. Some of these survivors may be waiting years for their abuser to face consequences and that means they are left hanging in the balance without any certainty of what is going to happen. I know this as a survivor, but as an advocate as well. I cannot imagine how impossible the process would be without the support of VWA and DV Advocates.

I have been an advocate for 6 years and every day we work with survivors to provide shelter, safety planning and support. I spend a substantial part of my time providing accompaniment for survivors as they are going to court for protection orders, family matters and attending their abuser's criminal proceedings. I've provided transportation for a survivor to and from court because it wasn't safe for her to drive her own vehicle, because even though her abuser was incarcerated, he had friends and family out looking for her. I have spoken for a survivor who was unable to give her Impact statement because she was terrified to speak in front of her abuser. I have sat with survivors who were devastated because they are forced to send their child with the person who has inflicted harm upon them, and safety planned with them about how to keep their children safe, when they can't be there physically. But this work isn't limited to our agency. All of the DVRC's across the state are providing this same advocacy and court-based advocates are as well. I cannot express how important this work is, and how these services are desperately needed.

I became an advocate in part, because of the incredible advocates and legal team that helped me. I am grateful to work with those people every day and see the impact that we are having in survivor's lives. I know that without these services I would not be where I am today, and looking back, I wonder if I would even still be here.

The process of leaving is incredibly difficult, and it rarely happens on the first try. Without the services that DVRC's and VWA's provide, I see that it would be substantially harder.

In closing, I thank you for your time, and ask for your support for LD 2084.