

mecasa

MAINE COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT

January 23, 2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Elizabeth Ward Saxl and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA), the organization which represents and serves Maine's sexual violence prevention and response programs as well as Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers. MECASA initiates and advocates for victim-centered public policy; provides expert training, technical assistance, and resources for providers and partners; and funds the service providers in your communities.

MECASA is here today in support of LD 2084, "An Act to to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime". Thank you to Senators Carney, Bennett, Daughtry and Duson and Representatives Carlow, Cloutier, Gattine, Milliken, and Rielly for sponsoring this critical legislation.

Over the last four decades, Maine has thoughtfully, painstakingly, dollar by dollar, built our victim service infrastructure. With the help of VOCA, today and every day in Maine:

- Legal Services for the Elderly is working with victims of financial exploitation so they can keep their homes,
- Maine's victim witness advocates are supporting the families of homicide victims through lengthy murder trials,
- domestic violence resource centers are engaging in safety planning with survivors whose lives are at risk,
- the Immigrant Resource Center of Maine is supporting victims who have experienced violence and are afraid to talk with people outside of their community,

- Pine Tree Legal Assistance is helping survivors access the PFAs that are increasing their safety,
- sexual assault support center advocates are there, in the middle of the night, for victims who are having forensic evidence collected in Maine's ERs after a sexual assault,
- victim advocates at the Department of Corrections are helping victims access restitution and are helping them plan for the release of the person who harmed them,
- Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers are interviewing children who have experienced sexual abuse, and
- trafficking victims are healing as they live in safety and receive services in the trafficking victims' shelter.

All of these services are funded by VOCA.

Most people are not aware of the supports that exist for victims of crime – not until they need them. But on October 25th, 2023, when our collective sense of safety was shaken by the events in Lewiston, these VOCA services were there and ready. On that day and in the days and weeks following:

- Maine's victim witness advocates provided support and information to survivors and the families of victims,
- Cara Cookson, the AG's Victim Witness Coordinator, coordinated federal and state victim service resources,
- the domestic violence resource centers supported survivors and family members who had histories of domestic violence and who had been retraumatized,
- Maine Children's Advocacy Center forensic interviewers and family advocates stood at the ready should children need to be interviewed as victims and witnesses,
- Pine Tree Legal Assistance's attorneys provided legal advice to survivors and to families of victims, and the
- the sexual assault support centers helped staff the Victims' Compensation table at the resource center.

These service providers offer life changing services for thousands of victims of crime every year. These services will either not exist or will be drastically reduced if this funding gap is not addressed.

Please support LD 2085.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

About Maine's Sexual Assault Service Providers

One in five Mainers will experience sexual assault at some point in their lifetime.¹ Each year, 14,000 Mainers will experience sexual violence.²

Maine's sexual violence service providers provide free and confidential services across the state to victims/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault and those close to them, as well as to individuals who wish to increase their understanding of the issues. Just some of the services include a 24-hour statewide sexual assault helpline, crisis intervention and information, support groups, in-person accompaniment and advocacy through the medical and legal systems, and school- and community-based prevention education. Services are provided for a victim/survivor regardless of when they experienced sexual violence, and regardless of what type of sexual violence they experienced. Types of sexual violence include, but are not limited to, sexual harassment and gender-based bullying, child sexual abuse, elder sexual abuse, stalking, sex trafficking, and sexual violence within an intimate partner relationship.

24/7 Confidential

Maine Sexual Assault Helpline: 1-800-871-7741

¹ Dumont, R. & Shaler, G. (2015). *Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities*. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine.

² *Ibid.*