

.....Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Joanna Stokinger and I come to you today in support of this legislation. I am a proud victim advocate and have been working with crime victims since 2002 in various capacities. In Maine, since 2016, I have worked with domestic violence victims as an advocate with the Maine DOC, surviving family members of homicide victims with the Maine AGs office, and as an elder advocate working with domestic violence victims over the age of 60. Currently, I am an advocate/navigator with the Maine Resiliency Center supporting victims and individuals impacted by the October 25, 2023, Lewiston Mass Shooting.

Much of my 22-year career has been spent with agencies where the funding for my salary came from Victims of Crime Act federal funding. Without this funding, I would not have had the career that I have had and supported and assisted hundreds of victims of crime. I can tell you that since I began working with victims of crime in 2002, I have never once felt that there were enough victim advocates to carry the caseloads or handle the capacity of the victims served. I have always worked the hardest I could and strived to make the lives of victims and survivors easier. I can attest to not being alone in feeling this way. Every victim advocate I have worked with or come across at conferences over the years has stated that there isn't enough of us to support the victims and do what they need to get through and try to heal.

When I heard last summer that we were looking at a 60% cut in VOCA funds, I honestly felt sick to my stomach immediately. I thought about all the families of homicide victims in Maine that I supported through trials and court hearings. I thought about who would help those people in the future if our funding was cut. I thought about how this cut is like a slap in the face to victims who are already part of a system where they have no control over the process and very little rights compared to the offenders. I have spent many hours explaining to victims and survivors that the system

isn't created for them. It's a fact and it's the system we have, but I believe we can do better for victims of crime.

I can't give you a specific number of people I have assisted since I began my work as an advocate; however, I can give you a snapshot of what a victim advocate really does and why funding these positions is so important.

- I have sat and held hands with mothers who have lost their children to murder through a two-week jury trial.
- I have attended safety planning meetings with terrified domestic violence victims whose offenders are preparing to be released from prison.
- I have sat with, hugged and cried with family members while detectives and prosecutors explain to them what they will hear in open court with the media present, the heinous acts that took their loved one's life.
- I have listened to audio recordings with a mother of her daughter's voice as she attempts to get help from law enforcement because her ex-boyfriend was threatening to kill her. She had to wait until the courthouse opened after a holiday weekend to try to get a protection order. Before that could happen, her ex-boyfriend murdered her and the father of her children, while the children were left with their parents' corpses.
- I have reviewed dozens of autopsy reports with mothers and fathers to give them some sense of what the medical examiner will be testifying to about the murder of their child.
- I have held back the hair of a vomiting mother after she listened to a defendant deny on the stand that he raped, sodomized, and killed her daughter.
- I have crawled under a house in the winter in an attempt to help a mother locate her daughter's beloved cat after she was murdered by her boyfriend.
- I have had many sleepless nights thinking about the days I spent sitting with a family through a murder trial that ended in acquittal -

and then sitting on the ground in that courtroom parking lot cradling a howling family member as a result of that verdict, or having to explain to a family that the trial has been continued AGAIN, or replaying the photos over and over in my head that I had to show family members of their loved one's last and often painful moments in life.

Most recently in the Lewiston Shooting I, alongside so many other VOCA funded advocates, spent 12-16-hour days working with the injured victims, next of kin and family members of the deceased, and those that were present at the shootings, including children who are forever changed by this event. I sat with daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, aunts, uncles and siblings, as they retrieved the personal items that were retrieved from the scenes. I supported a widow as she accepted items of clothing and her husband's wedding ring that had to be cleaned because it had biohazard material on it. In my capacity as an advocate, I attended 3 funerals in October/November of 2023.

Ask any prosecutor if they could do their jobs as efficiently as they do without a victim advocate. Ask the medical examiner's office if it would be easier or harder to coordinate with families and funeral homes without the help of an advocate. I asked a Detective with MSP MCU yesterday after we were meeting with families who lost their loved ones to homicide how he would feel about going to a murder trial without a victim advocate present to assist. His exact words were "No thank you!" In Maine, I personally know of many advocates who have been doing this work as long or longer than I have.

I don't say any of these things to get a pat on the back or get accolades, I know we are part of a very important team. I love my job, but it is hard. It has always been hard, and it will continue to be hard. But I have a passion for helping victims of crime and I have since 2002. Please don't let the crime victims in Maine suffer further because the federal funding is cut.