



Testimony of Kelly Brown, Executive Director at Next Step Domestic Violence Project,
In support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
1/16/2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Kelly Brown, and I am speaking with you on behalf of Next Step Domestic Violence Project in support of LD 2084 and the need for funding to maintain essential victim services in Hancock and Washington County Maine.

When I go home, I need to watch a comedy. I need to laugh and see something that is so absurd it can only take place in the imagination. I find it exhausting to watch programming that depicts crimes of violence as entertainment and as something that only happens on television or in big cities. If in fact someone finds the topic of violent crimes of interest, I ask them to simply open their own front door, as we do at Next Step Domestic Violence Project.

- We open the door and are met with a young girl from Lamoine, Maine who was forced to have sex with her parents' landlord as payment of rent. **Our Direct Service Helpline met with 1042 people in FY 2023** all with similar stories to this young girl in Lamoine. Our helpline assists folks to create safety plans, connects them with internal resources such as the legal services utilized by this young girl.
- Missy Fairfield, Next Steps Violence Intervention Program Coordinator opens the door to a young woman's home as she **accompanies the Washington County Sheriff's Department** on a follow up call. Missy calmly helps mom with changing the infant's diaper while explaining her options for a safety plan. Moms' cries subside, and she can begin working with Law Enforcement and agrees to come into the Next Step offices to work on a Protection from Abuse Order. Law Enforcement has come to depend on the work of advocates to assist with PFA's, go on follow up calls to provide advocacy in the immediate, and to provide essential training for their officers.
- Last year, **our legal team opened the door to 403 families** needing civil legal assistance with Protection from Abuse Orders. Maine's Domestic Violence Homicide Review Panel's recommendation regarding Protection from Abuse (PFA) Orders reflects the fact that most homicide cases reviewed over the past 20 years involved **no** PFA Orders, notable because this is one of the primary civil remedies in place to protect victims of domestic violence crime.
- The Next Step Shelter opens its doors to those most vulnerable in Washington County. **As the only shelter in Washington County**, they work regularly with Jail Administrator Rich Rolph; with Downeast Community Hospital Emergency Department with local landlords such as Richard Fickett of Fickett Property Management; and of course with Maine State Housing Authorities. This programs houses 40-60 people every year and assist many others to find permanent housing.
- Leslie Linder has worked as our Child Protective Services Liaison for over 10 years, meeting with families whose children were at most danger. Her services were requested by 127 families in 2023. She not only meets with them in **child protective family team meetings**, and providing support through our 24-hour helpline, she also created a support group specific to child welfare involved survivors for those survivors to connect, break away from the isolation forced upon



Testimony of Kelly Brown, Executive Director at Next Step Domestic Violence Project,
In support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crime
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
1/16/2024

them by their abusive partners, and have the support they need to then meet the needs of their children.

- As I was giving a ride home to one of the participants of Leslie's support group, who just had a baby shower thrown for her by the other survivors in the group, she said to me, "this is my third child and I have never felt so supported. These women are my family." The CPS Liaison position helps families stay united, alleviating the constant demand for foster families.
- Allie Williamson, Director of Prevention, opens the door to **every school in Hancock and Washington Counties**. She met with the third-grade class at Connors Emerson in Bar Harbor, opened the doors of the gymnasium at Bucksport Highschool to host a presentation for the incoming freshman and was invited by Nancy Soctomah at Peaceful Relations to speak with Sipayik Elementary 5th grade classroom.
- Next Step, in partnership with the Indian Township Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Program, Peaceful Relations in Sipayik, and AMHC Sexual Assault Services, created the Community Circle, a group for advocates and administration of these programs to consult with one another and ensure **there is no wrong door for a victim of crime in Hancock or Washington**.

If state funds are not secured to cover the 60% anticipated loss in our VOCA funding, I will be meeting with my Board of Directors in March to make the decision of **which three of these programs will be eliminated**. LD 2084 does not represent an ask for new funding for new programs or expanded services. It asks the State to make sure VOCA funded providers can stay whole in the face of known, anticipated cuts to federal VOCA funding so that we can continue to provide these basic, essential services to victims of crime in Maine. **A survivor who recently worked with our programs described Next Step's services as, "the life raft that saved me from sinking."** We hope you will support LD 2084 and ensure we can continue to be that life-saving service for survivors in our communities.