

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

My name is Courtney Pushard, and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of Victim-Witness Advocates across the state. Each District Attorney's Office and the Office of the Attorney General have Victim-Witness Advocates/Victim-Witness Coordinator positions. The role of the of the VWA is to ensure that under Maine Statue's Title 17 -A, Chapter 75 named Victim Rights, are upheld. Chapter 75 includes, but not limited to, the Victim's Right to be notified of release of a defendant, plea agreements, sentencing procedure and, confidentiality of victim records.

I am here today to represent Victim-Witness Advocates/Coordinators across the state to show support of **LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.**

When the mass shooting occurred- VWA's did not hesitate. Myself and two other advocates from Androscoggin County were in Bar Harbor for the Maine Prosecutor's Conference when news of the tragic events were being revealed. We left the conference before sunrise and never stopped going. With respect to the victims and victim's families--- I am not going to go into detail about the services we provided. Our services are confidential for a reason.

The weeks after the shooting- VWAs met with the locally elected officials, celebrities like Patrick Dempsey, even President and the First Lady, all who came to thank us for what we do **every day** for our community but less than 4 months later—here I am----- fighting for funding to keep the work of the VWA going.

But, other crimes in the community have not stopped. In Androscoggin County, I am one of two Victim-Witness Advocate for the entire county that handles Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking and, Sexual Assault cases, including investigations that go through the Children's Advocacy Center. We only have two people -- to cover one of the largest counties in the entire state— we are barely staying afloat with the current funding provided. We work often beyond working hours—where we make less than what a retail employee might make- to support victims of crime because without us, a lot of people would not know their rights or how the legal process transpires. I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard I heard from a victim that the advocacy they received is what gave them the strength to endure the criminal justice system so that way they could eventually hold their offender accountable.

To describe just a snapshot of what a VWA role is like:

To explain more of the day to day- when someone is arrested, advocates from the DA's office receive the police reports. We are the connection between law enforcement- the criminal justice world- to justice. VWAs introduce victims to prosecutor- partner agencies like SAPARS and SafeVoices to help navigate the complex legal terms.

This fall, I was in court with a domestic violence survivor and her children. One of the rights a victim has is the right to be heard at court hearings. I stood with the victim and her children as they each read their statements to their abuser and the judge. When some of the words were too difficult to read outloud, I took to the piece of paper and made sure the judge completely heard their account of the awful events that they had to endure—reading while they cried on my shoulder.

My advocacy did not stop in the courtroom, myself and the advocate from SafeVoices and myself made sure that the survivor and her children were signed up for notification of release from prison and stressed how we do not go away. We will safety plan with them once the notification comes through of his release.

The other layer of my caseload in particular are children who were sexually assaulted. If a child has to testify at a criminal trial, the parents are typically not allowed in the courtroom because the parent's have been given a sequestration order by the judge. I've been the person to explain what a sequestration order is to a parent of a child that has been sexually assaulted and assure them that I will be with their child the entire time in the court room—been awarded their trust to walk their child back in front of their abuser.

I've been the person to do the superhero stance with a child so that way they can feel brave enough to go into a courtroom to face their abuser. I've held a child's hand as they go to the stand to face a relative that has sexually assaulted them. I've become that friendly face for a child sitting in the court room rows as they have to describe to 12 jurors where on their body they have been touched and explain the job of the private part—because they are not old enough yet to know the exact terminology. I've been the person to grab a trashcan as soon as a child exits the court room because their nerves are just so high that they need to vomit.

To not support LD 2084 would be a disservice to survivors and victims of all crimes. Victim-Witness Advocates are the backbone to the criminal justice system. Like one the survivor of the mass shooting in Lewiston expressed to me they “never knew what an advocate was until they needed one”. I hope with your support of LD 2084 advocates across the state can continue to show up and support victims of crime.