

January 23, 2024

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

My name is Arian G. Clements. I am a resident of Brunswick, ME, a survivor, a parent of two adolescent girls, and since 2016, the Executive Director of Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM). SASSMM is 1 of 7 sexual assault support centers that serve the state of Maine and are core member centers of the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA).

I am here to speak to you on behalf of MECASA and the Coalition Centers about LD 2084, but first I'd like to thank you for the many laws that have been carefully crafted by this committee – from statutes of limitations expansions to admission of recorded child forensic interviews as testimony, these laws have been truly life changing.

Last March, I submitted testimony to the HHS Committee in support of LD 566, a workforce funding bill that would have raised advocate salaries from \$33,000/year to \$45,000. Despite being unanimously approved by the Committee and the Legislature, it was not funded, **and in its wake, more than half of our workforce has turned over**. *Today*, I am presenting testimony to express my **urgent support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes**, to prevent a cut that would further decimate core victim services, staffing, and programming for sexual violence survivors and their communities.

For our center and the six sexual assault centers across the state, the funding cut to VOCA services will be over \$1,000,000. If Maine does not fill the VOCA gap, we will be failing survivors and families at a time when the demand for these services across the state is only *increasing*.

Cuts of this magnitude would impact our center's ability to provide 24-7 helpline coverage; to accompany a survivor to court to file for a protection from abuse or harassment order, or to go with them to the hospital to get a forensic medical examination.

Trafficking Victim Emergency Funds will be eliminated. Survivors will no longer be able access funds to help secure their safety with a hotel stay, a bus ticket, nor a first month's rent payment.

Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) staffing among the state's 8 CAC providers will be reduced by more than half statewide. At SASSMM, our entire staff of four covering three CAC Midcoast locations, will be gone in October, as staff are nearly entirely VOCA funded, and partially ARPA (American Recovery Act) funded, which is also slated to end in 2025. CACs provide forensic interview and support services in cases of suspected child sexual abuse, by coordinating a team of specialized professionals in a safe, neutral, and child-centered environment, where regardless of a disclosure of sexual abuse, a child and caregiver can get needed services and referrals. CAC interviews are essential for child protective and criminal investigations to move forward and are

a national best practice for responding to child sexual assault. **Statewide CAC coverage has *only* been possible in Maine due to VOCA funds.** Without these funds, we risk returning to what support looked like in the 1980s; isolated and disjointed services without the capacity to meet the needs of survivors.

I have been working in this field for over 25 years. I have seen the dedication of hundreds of advocates slowly, but steadily work to shift our communities' social norms and responses to sexual violence from ones of secrecy, shame, and dismissal to recognition, empowerment, and healing. Advocates' passion and commitment have been the driving force of this movement for decades; actively filling a critical *unfunded* public health and mental health community need, with little to no recognition for the difficulty, nor being paid for the true value, of their work.

It is no exaggeration, when I say that Maine's core victim services infrastructure, which has been carefully built over the last forty years, is on the brink of being dismantled. Without LD2084, VOCA funded victim services will be reduced by almost \$6 million next year and have a devastating impact on already stretched services. If this Committee wants its previous efforts to be realized, this bill must be funded.

I ask Maine to responsibly step into this funding need and fill the VOCA gap as 18 other states, including 5 New England states, have already done.

Thank you for considering this critical funding bill and recognizing the core services that advocates across the state play in creating safer and healthier communities for us all.

Sincerely,

Arian G. Clements
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