



Testimony of Lucia Chomeau Hunt, Esq.
Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.

Speaking in Support of LD 2084
An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes
Date of Public Hearing: January 23, 2024

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Lucia Chomeau Hunt. I am the directing attorney of Family Law and Victim Rights at Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc., and I am speaking to you today in support of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

I have been asked to share the perspective of Pine Tree Legal Assistance on these issues and I am speaking today on behalf of Pine Tree Legal Assistance (Pine Tree). Pine Tree is a nonprofit organization with offices in Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor, Machias, and Presque Isle. Since 1967, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has provided free legal services to low-income people throughout the State of Maine.

Civil Legal Representation for Survivors

Attorneys in Pine Tree's statewide Family Law and Victim Rights unit represent survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. In 2023, we handled **1,369 civil legal cases for survivors**. This is about 18% of Pine Tree's total cases for 2023. About half of our work in the Family Law and Victim Rights Unit is supported by VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) funds.

Pine Tree has been receiving VOCA funds since 2015. We began with a pilot project based in our Lewiston office, prioritizing civil legal cases for non-offending parents and caretakers of child victims of sexual assault who were interviewed at the local Child Advocacy Center. In January of 2017, Pine Tree launched a VOCA funded expansion of our existing legal services for survivors, which allowed us for the first time to **provide legal representation for survivors in every courthouse in the state**, including rural courts such as Machias, Calais, Farmington, South Paris, Rockland, and Houlton. Using VOCA funding we are also able to **help the families of child victims**, something most of our other grants prohibit us from doing.

Survivors have no right to court-appointed counsel in civil cases, and although the people we help are victims of crime, they often turn to the civil legal system to address their needs for safety, to seek justice, and to protect their children. Pine Tree represents people in Protection from Abuse, family matters like divorce and parental rights, and Title IX cases. Having legal representation makes a difference in the outcome of civil legal cases. In one study, 83% of

victims represented by an attorney successfully obtained a protective order, as compared to just 32% of victims without an attorney.¹ Protecting people from ongoing harm is also a good investment. According to the National Institute of Health, the estimated intimate partner violence lifetime cost was \$103,767 per female victim and \$23,414 per male victim.²

Maine's Network of Victim Services Resources

Pine Tree Legal's services exist as part of the network of resources available to survivors throughout the state. We receive referrals directly from the child advocacy centers, domestic violence resource centers, and sexual assault support centers. We work closely with all the other VOCA-funded providers to form an effective and efficient set of resources, connected in a way that best supports survivors and allows us each to play a unique role. We are here in front of you today together because each of these pieces forms a crucial part of the essential services that support victims. The Lewiston tragedy gave us a poignant example of the ways VOCA-funded agencies work together, responding quickly and efficiently to the crisis in the hours and days after the shooting. **Victim services is a great example of a Maine system that is working, and working well- but it will not survive a cut of this magnitude, and the network that has been so carefully built will take years to re-establish.**

This network extends to other legal services, both those we offer internally at Pine Tree Legal as well as the other civil legal services for low-income people in Maine. There are also other pending bills this session, such as the sexual assault advocate funding bill, that address crucial pieces of this victim services infrastructure. Unfortunately, we are already experiencing the impact of high advocate turnover at the sexual assault support centers, leaving victims less supported and less connected with other resources.

Client story

Recently, in Northern Maine, Pine Tree assisted our client obtain a Protection from Abuse Order against her husband. He had threatened to take their kids away from her, telling her she would never see them again if she didn't move to Maine with him, punched holes in cabinets and dents in her truck, and drove erratically at excessive speeds with her in the car. He got extremely intoxicated and became belligerent around the kids, and she told him to leave. He did leave, but he came back that same night, tried breaking in through the bedroom window, and threatened to kill her. One of the children was in the room and called 911. He was arrested that night and Pine Tree represented her in the protection from abuse case. We negotiated a 2-year order that includes a firearms prohibition. Our client was awarded possession of the house, temporary sole parental rights, and the vehicle. The defendant was ordered to undergo a substance abuse evaluation and to follow all recommendations.

Thank you to Senator Carney and her co-sponsors, and this committee, for your support of survivors. I urge you to pass LD 2084 to maintain core services for survivors.

¹ Jane Murphy, Engaging with the State: The Growing Reliance on Lawyers and Judges to Protect Battered Women, 11 Am. U. J. Gender Soc. Pol'y & L. 499, 511-12 (2003).³²Liz Elwart et al.

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6161830/>