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Judicial Branch testimony in favor of LD 2084, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes:

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Julie Finn and I represent the Judicial Branch. I would like to provide testimony in support of this bill.

As you have heard, LD 2084 provides funding to replace federal support that has been reduced under the Victims of Crime Act, or VOCA. Because VOCA funds support the work of the Judicial Branch both directly and indirectly, the loss of this funding would have a negative impact on the courts.

First, the loss of funding would negatively affect the Judicial Branch's Court Appointed Special Advocate program, or Maine CASA. Maine CASA recruits, trains, and supervises volunteers to serve as guardians ad litem, or GALs, in child protection cases. Maine is one of forty-nine states that have a CASA program. We currently have 107 committed citizens serving as CASA GALs. In the current federal fiscal year ending on September 30, 2024, Maine CASA received \$344,800 in VOCA funding. Plans to expand the CASA program in Maine due to the increase in child protection cases have been put on hold due to an expected reduction in VOCA funds.

There would be indirect effects on the courts as well as illustrated by the following examples:

- VOCA provides funding for a statewide domestic violence helpline that is staffed 24 hours per day, seven days per week. If that hotline is not as readily available to victims, it could present a safety concern for Maine's citizens while also increasing the public's outreach to court clerks for general guidance.
- VOCA funds supports Victim Witness Advocates who assist victims of crime and answer questions related to court proceedings that may otherwise be directed to the clerks' offices.
- VOCA dollars assist civil legal service providers in Maine. These attorneys are critical participants in the protection from abuse docket, for example. Having attorneys available

to assist litigants (1) increases the likelihood of agreements, (2) reduces the time that a judge must spend explaining the law and court process, and (3) increases access to justice for Maine people. In a time of strained judicial resources, the efficiencies created by the provision of legal assistance to litigants streamline difficult dockets, thereby creating more time for other matters.

Finally, please note that the bill's language provides 6 million dollars to the Department of Health and Human Services for "crime victim services" and does not specifically mention that the funding is intended to be distributed to replace VOCA funding. There are some line items funded under VOCA that technically do not fall under "crime victim services."

For all these reasons, the Judicial Branch supports the passage of LD 2084. Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions.