

Testimony in Support LD 2129 Tina Panayides

Good Morning Chair Beebe-Center, Chair Salisbury, and members of the Committee.

My name is Tina Panayides and I am here to speak in favor of LD 2129. I speak today as a private citizen, but one informed as a prosecutor and Chair of the Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner (or SAFE), Advisory Board.

In 2021, our Board recognized that although a 2018 Muskie School study had made specific recommendations for sexual assault exam kit reform, for various reasons, not many of those had been fully adopted around the state.

In response, we created a kit subcommittee that includes SAFEs, victim advocates, law enforcement, lab partners, and prosecutors and we talked with other states who are ahead of us in this work. They were clear: we need a tracking system, a complete inventory of stored kits, and testing of all reported kits. Many directly told our subcommittee that legislation is critical to ensure the work is funded and accomplished.

Recent Maine data is disturbing. The Crime Lab distributed 362 kits to hospitals for evidence collection in 2022. Out of those, only 78 (22%) were submitted to the lab for testing. In 2023, out of 415 kits were sent to hospitals for evidence collection, only 50 (12%) so far have been submitted for testing. We also have learned that kits travel between states due to jurisdictional reasons, but we have no way to track those kits either.

Yearly, around 80% of kits sent out for evidence collection and potentially containing evidence of sexual assault, are going into a 'black hole,' their locations completely unknown. A tracking system and full and complete inventory would remedy this.

What we learned during our fall conference with national experts reinforced what we heard in our subcommittee:

- \*by law, track and inventory all kits,
- \*test all reported kits and
- \*have a transparent, trauma-informed victim notification process.

Without this, survivors will continue to be denied justice and future victims will be put at risk. Some legislators have already heard from constituent-survivors who support legislative action. In addition to providing a greater degree of public safety, doing this work can also exonerate people, achieving true justice in the criminal system.

Although some counties plan to address backlogs of stored kits with federal grants, going forward, the lab should be tracking and processing all reported kits with state funding. It is time prioritize sexual assault investigations in Maine by giving them the resources they deserve.

Thank you to Rep. Geiger and the co-sponsors (including my representative, Dan Ankeles), for recognizing this public health and public safety emergency and putting this bill forward in this session, and to the committee for your work on these issues.