

February 27, 2024

Senator Baldacci, Senator Rotundo, Representative Meyer, Representative Sachs, and Members of Health and Human Services and Appropriations Committees:

My name is Arian G. Clements and I am a resident of Brunswick, ME. I am also a survivor, a parent of two adolescent girls in the Brunswick school system, and the Executive Director of Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM) since 2016.

I am submitting testimony to express my urgent and emphatic support of an HHS priority bill that is not currently in the budget—LD 566, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

I have been working in this field for over 25 years. I have seen the heart and dedication of hundreds of advocates slowly, but steadily work to shift our communities' social norms and responses to sexual violence from ones of secrecy and 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 community need, with little to no recognition for the difficulty nor being paid for the true value of their work.

As an Executive Director, I have struggled and strategized for years in how to enhance our services and programming to reach more people through increased skilled staffing, while consistently fighting against a limited workforce budget, staff retention and burnout, and the damaging loss of their expertise and trusted partnerships built within our communities. It often feels like pushing a rock up a hill, only for it to roll back and crush you. The current funding structure for advocates working to end sexual violence is no less punishing nor is it sustainable to providing responsive and educated intervention and prevention services. It relies on young workers, taking entry level pay, doing trauma filled work with nuanced and specialized skills, to perform until they can't afford to any longer. It provides no path for their continued growth as professionals nor financial sustainability for them to invest their time and energy in this field long term. The result is advocates leaving the work for less stressful and higher paying jobs and the loss of their expertise and skills in support of survivors.

Advocates perform a vital piece in supporting survivors and their impacted loved ones and creating protective factors through education on the active prevention of harmful norms and practices. The longer advocates are in the work, the better they

are at being advocates, trainers and educators, yet the funding of staff is built on a cycle of redundancy that undermines our efforts. Again, the rock.

This funding bill would be a positive and essential step toward increasing the sustainability of the services in our communities, supporting the professional development of all advocates, and recognizing the true value of a trained advocate to make positive change. When this bill went unfunded last session, despite being unanimously approved by the Committee and the Legislature, more than half of our workforce turned over. As recent as today, one of SASSMM's most seasoned staffers (5 years) gave their notice, because they simply need to earn more money. I cannot overstate the negative impact this will have on client services and our established community partnerships.

I want to thank the committee for considering this funding bill and recognizing the critical core community services that advocates across the state play in creating safer and healthier communities for us all. I emphatically ask that you consider including this funding in the supplemental budget.

Sincerely,

Arian G. Clements

Brunswick, ME

Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM)

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