

STATE OF MAINE

KATHRYN SLATTERY
DISTRICT I

JACQUELINE SARTORIS
DISTRICT II

NEIL MCLEAN
DISTRICT III

MAEGHAN MALONEY
DISTRICT IV



R. CHRISTOPHER ALMY
DISTRICT V

NATASHA IRVING
DISTRICT VI

ROBERT GRANGER
DISTRICT VII

TODD R. COLLINS
DISTRICT VIII

**MAINE PROSECUTORS ASSOCIATION
SHIRA BURNS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

“An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government and Changing Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026, and June 30, 2027” LD 210

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary and the
Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
Public Hearing Date: February 11, 2025
Testimony in Support of LD 210

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, members of the committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. My name is Shira Burns and I represent the Maine Prosecutors Association. I am here to testify in support of LD 210 in regard to fully funding the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) gap that currently exists.

It is important to know that a fundamental part of prosecution is to represent the State of Maine and achieve offender accountability and public safety which includes individual safety of crime victims. This is not achievable without collaboration from our system based victim witness advocates (VWAs), our community based advocates, and organizations that represent victims in the civil legal process, like Pine Tree Legal, that can and do affect criminal prosecution. We are here today in front of both of your committees as our prosecutorial and court response is dependent on there being effective victim services. VOCA funds the foundation of those services.

Six of Maine’s eight prosecutorial districts and the Office of the Attorney General rely on VOCA grant funding for their Victim Witness Advocate programs. Every District Attorney’s Office in Maine has at least one VWA and some offices have as many as five – totally forty two VWAs statewide. VWAs employed in the District Attorney Offices provide support to victims of property and financial crimes, including thefts and home invasions, as well as violent crimes, such as domestic and sexual abuse, elder abuse, aggravated assaults, attempted murders, and operating under the influence manslaughters. Each of the six prosecutorial districts that receive VOCA funding get \$55,000 each year to support salaries of VWAs. This amount has not increased in well over a decade.

VWAs are an essential part of the criminal justice system. As prosecutors we often need victims and survivors to engage with the criminal legal process to secure convictions even though the process is grueling for a victim. The VWAs help victims find the strength and supports they need to engage with the criminal legal system as safely as possible. VWAs keep victims informed about the process and help us as prosecutors understand victims' needs and safety concerns as we resolve cases.

I was a frontline domestic and sexual abuse prosecutor for almost ten years in York County and have countless stories of being able to achieve offender accountability and victim safety with the partnership and collaboration of our VWAs and community based advocates. Lee Perry heinously assaulted multiple partners of his. When his last victim was brutally beaten leaving her with broken bones, knife wounds, and incontinence from strangulation, his case came to my desk. A long time VWA of York County met with me and had the loudest voice in the room. She told me what this victim needed in this moment and that was my attention. The VWA had me constantly meet with the victim to keep her engaged in the process and to provide her with a sense of safety that we were going to do everything we could so this man could never touch her again. The VWA connected her with the local community based resource center, Caring Unlimited, so she could be provided services and increase the likelihood she could live a healthy and safe life going forward. Lee Perry was sentenced to nine years with a consecutive five years all suspended and four year probation for the beating of his victim after she was able to do the impossible, go into a courtroom, face her longtime abuser and tell the gruesome facts of what she endured to a roomful of strangers in open court.

It is the VWAs around the State that teach prosecutors compassion and how to be victim centered and trauma informed in our approach. It is the community based advocates that provide the foundation of victim engagement with the criminal legal system. For these reasons, the Maine Prosecutors Association supports fully funding the VOCA gap.

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