

mecasa

MAINE COALITION AGAINST
SEXUAL ASSAULT

February 11, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Elizabeth Ward Saxl and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA), the organization which represents and serves Maine's sexual violence prevention and response programs as well as Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers. MECASA initiates and advocates for victim-centered public policy; provides expert training, technical assistance, and resources for providers and partners; and funds the service providers in your communities.

MECASA is here today **to testify in support of maintaining the current level of funding for civil legal services as you consider the next biennial budget, LD 210**. Our member sexual assault support centers strongly urge you to make this funding ongoing.

Each year, 19,000 Mainers will experience sexual violence.¹ Yet of those 19,000 Mainers, fewer than three percent will make a report to law enforcement. And so, one of the only paths to justice and safety for the thousands of remaining survivors is accessing civil legal protections.

¹ Dumont, R. & Shaler, G. (2015). *Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities*. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine.

The good news is thanks to the hard work of you and prior Legislatures, we have some of the most comprehensive legal protections in the country for victims/survivors of sexual violence. The other good news is that our friends at Pine Tree Legal Assistance (PTLA), Legal Services for Maine Elders (LSE), Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), the Volunteer Lawyers' Project (VLP), Disability Rights Maine (DRM), Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP), the Clinics at Maine Law, and the Justice Foundation have used their limited resources to provide targeted, high-quality legal assistance to your constituents across the state. Also in the good news column is that the attorneys who primarily represent sexual violence victims/survivors are extraordinary – they are deeply knowledgeable about the range of protections available for victims and their practice is sensitive and trauma-informed.

Legal aid attorneys support hundreds of sexual assault survivors every year.

Legal aid supports high school and college students in Title IX issues when they have been sexually assaulted by another student, allowing them to continue attending classes as well as being able to continue with after-school activities such as sports and participate fully in special occasions such as prom and graduation by advocating for specific safety plans to help student survivors continue to fully access their education.

Legal aid supports tenants from being evicted for refusing to have sex with their landlords.

Legal aid supports the families of child victims of sexual violence obtain protection from further abuse through the civil legal system.

Legal aid supports victims with intellectual disabilities to obtain court-ordered protection resulting in their increased safety.

Without civil legal providers, these survivors would be without representation – they would leave school, be evicted, and be subject to continued sexual violence.

The bad news is that many victims are going unrepresented. We need more staff at Maine's legal services organizations, not less. The current levels of funding should be maintained, at a minimum, so that the survivors of sexual violence can continue to attend school, safely - so that trained attorneys can support elder victims, so that survivors who need T and U-Visas and children who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected can access legal protections, and so that children interviewed at child advocacy centers can get protection orders and family court orders that protect them from further abuse. We need more legal services staff to support victims. These needs are not one-time. They are ongoing.

I would also add that my enthusiasm for these service providers is not limited to my work time. My husband Mike and I believe heart and soul in the life changing services these entities provide and as a result make the Campaign for Justice, which funds these agencies, our highest charitable giving priority – at a rate many times more than what we donate to the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault, an organization which we also think does great work.

I would urge you to join us in our commitment to provide ongoing funding to these organizations and would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

About Maine's Sexual Assault Service Providers

Maine's sexual violence service providers provide free and confidential services across the state to victims/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault and those close to them, as well as to individuals who wish to increase their understanding of the issues. Just some of the services include a 24-hour statewide sexual assault helpline, crisis intervention and information, support groups, in-person accompaniment and advocacy through the medical and legal systems, and school- and community-based prevention education. Services are provided for a victim/survivor regardless of when they experienced sexual violence, and regardless of what type of sexual violence they experienced. Types of sexual violence include, but are not limited to, sexual harassment and gender-based bullying, child sexual abuse, elder sexual abuse, stalking, sex trafficking, and sexual violence within an intimate partner relationship.

24/7 Confidential

Maine Sexual Assault Helpline: 1-800-871-7741