

mecasa

MAINE COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT

February 24, 2025

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

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Elizabeth Ward Saxl, and I am here on behalf of the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault to provide information about three VOCA funded services, Maine's sexual assault support centers, the Children's Advocacy Centers, and the Trafficking Victims Fund. I'm also here to talk more generally about the critical services provided by all these VOCA-funded agencies.

We are testifying in favor of the Governors biennial budget. We are grateful for the ongoing \$3,000,000 she has proposed to begin to fill the VOCA gap. And we are hopeful that you will allocate the full \$6,000,000 per year on an ongoing basis.

One in five Mainers will experience sexual violence in their lifetime, and every year in Maine, 19,000 are sexually assaulted. Fortunately, there are services available that can help prevent and respond to these traumas, and we are here today to ask for your help in ensuring that they can continue to do their vitally important work.

Sexual Assault Support Centers

First, Maine's sexual assault support centers provide free, low barrier advocacy services which are available 24/7 to anyone who has been affected by sexual violence, no matter when the harm occurred—it may be hours, days, weeks, or even years later.

Collectively, our programs served nearly 6,000 clients last year. They supported Mainers of all ages, genders, races, and abilities who survived a range of sexual violence experiences, including but not limited to sexual assault, child sexual abuse, harassment, military sexual assault, nonconsensual image sharing, and human trafficking.

Advocates facilitated more than 300 support groups, working hard to provide options for survivors who have access needs, including those who are incarcerated, those without transportation or childcare, and those requiring interpretation services.

Last year, there was a 9% increase in demand for advocacy services and Helpline calls have doubled in the last 7 years. It is clear that the need for services is growing all the time—and VOCA funding provides the foundational support for these services.

Maine Network of Children’s Advocacy Centers

Additionally, VOCA provides approximately half the funding for Maine’s Children’s Advocacy Centers or CACs. CACs are an integral part of the child sexual abuse response in our state and they are a nationwide best practice model for supporting youth and their families.

When there is concern that a child has experienced sexual abuse, the entire family can receive services through local CACs. While trained forensic interviewers talk with the child, family advocates work with caregivers to connect the family to the resources they may need to cope, including mental health services, advocacy, and referrals to local food pantries.

Meanwhile, forensic interviewers are highly trained to work with children to learn what happened. The CAC model allows investigators involved with a case to listen in on the child’s recorded interview. That means that people like law enforcement and child protective services can hear the child tell their story just one time. Without CACs, children might be asked to repeat their story over, and over, and over again. That can cause additional trauma to the youth and is also likely to negatively impact prosecution outcomes. Last year, Maine’s CACs conducted almost 1,200 forensic interviews with children suspected of experiencing sexual abuse.

We cannot afford to go back to a time before CACs existed in Maine, but right now, their sustainability is at risk.

Trafficking Victims Fund

Finally, VOCA provides funding for the Maine Trafficking Victims Fund, a low barrier resource for meeting the emergency needs of trafficking survivors as they exit human trafficking situations. Through the Fund, service providers can offer survivors financial support with basic needs like rent, furniture, gas, bus tickets, car repairs, prescriptions, copays, diapers, car seats, groceries, and clothing.

Last year, this program funded over \$62,000 in emergency support for 63 human trafficking survivors in Maine - helping 34 survivors access critical transportation, providing clothing to 24 survivors, ensuring 20 survivors could access shelter, and much more.

Maine’s VOCA-funded Victim Services

Over the last four decades, Maine has thoughtfully, painstakingly, dollar by dollar, built our victim service infrastructure. With the help of VOCA, today and every day in Maine:

- Legal Services for Maine Elders is working with victims of financial exploitation so they can keep their homes,
- Maine's victim witness advocates are supporting the families of homicide victims through lengthy murder trials
- Domestic violence resource centers are engaging in safety planning with survivors whose lives are at risk
- the Immigrant Resource Center of Maine is supporting victims who have experienced violence and are afraid to talk with people outside of their community
- Pine Tree Legal Assistance is helping survivors access the PFAs that are increasing their safety,
- sexual assault support center advocates are there, in the middle of the night, for victims who are having forensic evidence collected in Maine's ERs after a sexual assault
- victim advocates at the Department of Corrections are helping victims access restitution and are helping them plan for the release of the person who harmed them
- Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers are interviewing children who have experienced sexual abuse, and
- trafficking victims are healing as they live in safety and receive services in the trafficking victims' shelter.

All of these services are funded by VOCA.

Most people are not aware of the supports that exist for victims of crime – not until they need them. But on October 25th, 2023, when our collective sense of safety was shaken by the events in Lewiston, these VOCA services were there and ready. On that day and in the days and weeks following:

- Maine's victim witness advocates provided support and information to survivors and the families of victims
- Cara Cookson, the AG's Victim Witness Coordinator, coordinated federal and state victim service resources
- the domestic violence resource centers supported survivors and family members who had histories of domestic violence and who had been retraumatized
- Maine Children's Advocacy Center forensic interviewers and family advocates stood at the ready should children need to be interviewed as victims and witnesses
- Pine Tree Legal Assistance's attorneys provided legal advice to survivors and to families of victims, and the
- the sexual assault support centers helped staff the Victims' Compensation table at the resource center.

These service providers offer life changing services for thousands of victims of crime every year. And these services will either not exist or will be drastically reduced if this funding gap is not addressed.

Thank you again for inviting us to present today and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.