



Jill C. Duson
Senator, District 27
Assistant Majority Leader

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

***Testimony of Senate Assistant Majority Leader Jill C. Duson on
LD 210, 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 for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025,
June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
February 24, 2025***

Good morning, Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and the distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee; and Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Jill Duson, I am the Senate Assistant Majority Leader, proudly serving Senate District 27, which is part of Portland and part of Westbrook. I am pleased to be back before this committee, having been on the other side of the horseshoe in the 131st Legislature.

I am here today to speak in support of the Purchased Social Services section of the budget proposal, and specifically the work we left undone last legislative session.

In Maine we are fortunate to have sexual assault victim advocates who are on call across the state every hour of the day, every day of the week. These advocates respond to calls for service in the middle of the night, often meeting survivors bedside in Emergency Departments. Their work and dedication to justice is nothing short of heroic, and is often life saving.

Over the last few years, turnover in the field has increased significantly. And while you might assume that is a result of the stress and trauma of their day to day work, that is not the case. When surveyed, advocates who were considering leaving the field almost universally indicated pay was the reason – in fact, some advocates were working second jobs in order to stay in the field. They love this work and know how important it is to the 19,000 Mainers each year who experience sexual violence.

Last session, my colleague Representative Stover and I sponsored a bill to increase wages for sexual assault support center advocates from a low of \$35,000 to \$45,000 as well as to support specialized services for survivors who experience sexual violence at higher rate than other – like individuals with developmental disabilities. The Health and Human Services Committee unanimously supported our bill, which was then funded by Appropriations with strong bipartisan support. But, being one of the bills which was addressed post-adjourment, it never became law.

When we introduced that bill, turnover dropped significantly. Sexual assault advocates had reason for hope. And, in the six months after the bill died, nearly 60% of staff left the field during a year with a 9% increase in demand for services. But many of those advocates are waiting to come back.

As a former AFA member, I understand your schedule – and so while we have many advocates and community members who will provide testimony when this bill, (LD 117, “An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services”) is heard in HHS, today you will just hear directly from one victim advocate

Standing here before you today, as a survivor myself, I implore you to consider funding this proposal to both protect access to this critical care and also to protect access to the first step to justice.

I look forward to following this committee's careful consideration of the Purchased Social Services section of the budget and ask you to consider including this initiative as you move forward. Survivors and advocates are counting on us, the Maine Legislature, to have their backs.

Thank you for your time today, and I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have for me.



132nd MAINE LEGISLATURE

FIRST REGULAR SESSION-2025

Legislative Document

No. 117

S.P. 16

In Senate, January 8, 2025

An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services

Reference to the Committee on Health and Human Services suggested and ordered printed.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D M Grant".

DAREK M. GRANT
Secretary of the Senate

Presented by Senator DUSON of Cumberland.
Cosponsored by Representative CARLOW of Buxton and
Senators: BENNETT of Oxford, President DAUGHTRY of Cumberland, HICKMAN of
Kennebec, Representatives: GATTINE of Westbrook, GRAMLICH of Old Orchard Beach,
MILLIKEN of Blue Hill, MOONEN of Portland, STOVER of Boothbay.

1 **Be it enacted by the People of the State of Maine as follows:**

2 **Sec. 1. Appropriations and allocations.** The following appropriations and
3 allocations are made.

4 **HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, DEPARTMENT OF**

5 **Purchased Social Services 0228**

6 Initiative: Provides funding for sexual assault services.

7 GENERAL FUND	2025-26	2026-27
8 All Other	\$1,230,000	\$1,830,000
9		
10 GENERAL FUND TOTAL	<u>\$1,230,000</u>	<u>\$1,830,000</u>

11 **SUMMARY**

12 This bill provides funding for sexual assault services.

LD 117 - An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services

Addressing the Sexual Assault Services Staffing Crisis

In fiscal year 2023, **61%** of sexual assault advocates in Maine left their positions - with many leaving in the months after the failure of a bill to increase their wages during the 131st Legislature. Of the advocates who stayed in their jobs, almost **half** have indicated they plan to leave within the next two years.

Advocates have difficult and complex jobs that require them to be on-call regularly overnight and on weekends - a reality their wages do not reflect.

None of the Sexual Assault Support Centers or Children's Advocacy Centers in Maine are currently offering staff a living wage for a working family. Only four of the seven centers are offering an income that can cover basic needs and bills for even an individual working and living in Maine.

70%
of those surveyed said that low pay was the main cause for their plan to leave.

This bill raises annual wages to better align with positions with comparable experience and training.

Addressing Disproportionate Impacts of Sexual Violence

Some communities experience sexual violence at a higher rate than other communities.

Black, Indigenous, foreign-born, male, & older survivors are more likely to seek informal help, if they seek help at all. They often distrust formal services and prefer services by and for people like themselves.

Culturally-specific services, in conjunction with victim-centered, trauma-informed practices, lead to better outcomes in terms of victims' mental health and well-being.

80%
of people with developmental disabilities are sexually assaulted in their lifetime & half of those will experience more than 10 assaults.

35%
of Black women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.

25%
of women in the military will experience sexual trauma or assault in their career.

This bill will provide outreach and services for disproportionately impacted populations through organizations trusted within their communities.