



The Maine Coalition
to End Domestic Violence

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Remarks by Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director, Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence
Regarding Purchased Social Services funds for Domestic Violence Services and
Victims of Crime Act funds in the Biennial Budget
Before the Joint Standing Committees of Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Health and
Human Services
February 24, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Health and Human Services Committees, my name is Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence.

I testified in a previous hearing on the budget regarding the critical need to fully fund the \$6 million gap created by a substantial reduction in Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds from the federal government. There is no indication that the Victims of Crime Fund will be restored for at least several more years, and VOCA is the central source of federal financial support for direct services to victims of crime, and the largest single source of victim services specific funding in Maine. While \$3 million is set out in the proposed biennial budget, the need remains \$6 million.

Today, I am here to speak about the need for a separate \$4 million annual increase in ongoing state general funds to support services for victims of domestic abuse and violence.

The Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence administers a consolidated contract with the Maine's **Department of Health and Human Services that provides a combination of federal and state general funds to support the core services of Maine's 8 Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers. Of the \$9.7 million in the current fiscal year's contract, only \$1.5 million is ongoing state general funds.** Federal funds from 9 separate sources comprise the balance of revenues, including \$630,000 in federal funds that will end on September 30, 2025. There is a substantial amount of one-time backfill funding in this contract: \$4.1 million. This was the amount needed to maintain the same level of VOCA funding as the previous two contract years. The bottom line is that domestic violence services in Maine are facing the real possibility of a contract for services beginning 10/1/2025 with less than half of the revenue in the current contract, which is already insufficient to meet the need.

In 2024, Maine's Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers served nearly 15,000 people, of whom 8,572 accessed services through the 24-hour helpline. Advocates fielded over 19,000 calls to

their crisis helplines and engaged with victims in 20,000 additional calls. We serve more than 500 Maine people on any given day. About 30% of the people assisted are first connected the assistance through what we call Advocate Initiated Contact in which, rather than waiting for the person to call for help, advocates reach out based on referrals from law enforcement officers, the courts, or Certified Domestic Violence Intervention Programs (formerly known as Batterer Intervention) and child protection caseworkers.

In 2024, advocates supported 5,980 people with court advocacy across Maine's 26 District Courts, and 1,016 people with shelter and/or long-term housing assistance, including 490 children. 1,009 parents experiencing abuse received help navigating child protective services and their path to safety for both themselves and their children. At least half of the people we serve have one child or more.

The need for services has outpaced our ability to staff this critical and extremely hard work, increasing burnout and staff turnover. Statewide, there are fewer than 190 full time advocates doing all this trauma-informed, specialized crisis work. They are not paid sufficiently, and there are simply not enough of them. Wages are well below the average for workers in comparable fields, such as DHHS case workers. Historically, the crisis helpline was frequently staffed by volunteers. This is no longer true. There has been a reduction of over 50% in the number of volunteers available for this work over the past 5 years. The volume of calls, complexity of circumstances, and level of risk that advocates are responding to are simply more than most volunteers are able to manage.

In addition to the costs associated with personnel, as we all know, the costs of everything have increased. The Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers operate 12 shelters and as many outreach sites. Over the past 5 years heating costs are up 28% and electricity 59%, for example.

Maine has historically depended almost entirely on federal dollars to support domestic violence services. In addition to the federal funds that are included in the DHHS contract, all the DV Resource Centers have worked hard to secure direct, competitive federal grants to supplement the DHHS contract to sustain core services as well as to enhance the broader community response to domestic violence. Grants from the Dept. of Justice Office on Violence Against Women obtained by the DV Resource Centers and MCEDV fund nearly 25% of the advocacy workforce statewide as well as a prosecutor, a law enforcement officer, 4 attorneys, and 3 sexual assault advocates. All those funds are currently in jeopardy due to changes at the federal level. Nearly half of these grants end on September 30 of this year, and the process for applying to renew them has been shut down – with no indication of when it may reopen. These are dire times, indeed.

A few words from survivors regarding their experiences of accessing services from the Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers:



MCEDV.

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- ❖ Funding for programs and services for survivors of domestic abuse is essential. **I don't know how I would have been able to handle any of what I had to go through on my own.** – Elizabeth, York County.
- ❖ I feel incredibly grateful to have met Through These Doors; as a woman and a minority I received so much help. I would like to please kindly request for the government to support families like mine. I think that **families like mine would experience tremendous hardship and challenge without these services.** – Sokumthim, Cumberland County
- ❖ As a result of my situation, I have had heavy involvement in the court system, attending numerous court dates with more to come. I am a witness in numerous court cases. **Every step of the way I have had support, whether through the 24/7 crisis line, meetings with my advocate, weekly support groups, or the physical presence of an advocate with me at every court appearance.**
-T. (declined to give name publicly)
- ❖ **Without Partners for Peace and all the assistance/support that they have provided, I truly believe that my son and I would've died in the woods... I owe them our lives.** The idea that a funding cut would reduce their ability to help others in similar situations terrifies me... I still utilize their services today. Without the ongoing utilization, my mental state through this transition would have suffered greatly and affected my son potentially worse-so. Imagine what the lives of those helped would look like had Partners for Peace not been able to assist them... not because of a lack of desire, effort, and most importantly, NEED, but because they simply didn't have the budget? How much are those lives worth to you? -G. (declined to give name publicly)

I have never heard anyone suggest that our work is anything but essential. DV is at the root of so much of Maine's crime, where overall we are such a relatively safe place to live, and consistently half of our Maine's homicides are the result of domestic violence. Our work is homicide prevention; it is critical to support children's resilience to adverse childhood experiences; and it is a critical component of the civil and criminal legal response to domestic violence.

Please prioritize services for the parents and children trying to escape domestic violence by increasing support for these critical services by \$4 million per year in ongoing state general funds, and please prioritize fully funding the \$6 million needed to backfill the VOCA funding gap.

Thank you.