

LD 670 - An Act to Address Coercive Control in Domestic Abuse Cases

Testimony of John Brautigam, Esq. for Legal Services for Maine Elders Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

March 3, 2025

Good morning, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary.

My name is John Brautigam, and I am here today on behalf of Legal Services for Maine Elders. LSE provides free legal help for Mainers aged 60 and older when their basic human needs are at stake.

LD 670 would expand the definition of domestic abuse to include coercive control. We appreciate the sponsor for bringing this forth and we testify in support of the concept, with certain clarifications and caveats.

Domestic abuse is often understood as physical violence, but this narrow view fails to capture the full scope of harm many survivors endure. Abusers frequently use tactics that do not leave visible wounds but are just as damaging — manipulating their victims through financial control, isolation, intimidation, and the restriction of basic freedoms. These patterns of behavior, commonly referred to as coercive control, allow abusers to exert dominance over their victims, trapping them in relationships of fear and dependency.

Coercive control manifests in various ways, including:

- Restricting a victim's access to money, employment, or financial independence.
- Controlling access to communication devices, social media, and personal correspondence, isolating the victim from friends, family, and support networks.
- Monitoring or tracking a victim's location or activities without consent.
- Threatening harm to children, pets, or other loved ones as a means of control.
- Depriving the victim of basic needs such as food, medical care, or transportation.

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While these tactics may not always result in immediate physical harm, their long-term psychological impact can be devastating, leaving victims feeling powerless, trapped, and unable to seek help. Survivors of coercive control often describe their experiences as a form of invisible imprisonment.

The reason we testify with caution is that Maine already has a good law on the books with an expansive definition of abuse in Title 19-A. Many aspects of coercive control are addressed by the statute, although the term coercive control is not used.

Importantly, as the Maine Coalition on Domestic Violence explains in their testimony, there is some risk that abusers may turn the law against the victim, arguing that legitimate efforts by the victim to secure their own safety may somehow be twisted to look like attempts to exercise coercive control over the abuser. We ask you to be mindful of MECDV's testimony regarding these potential unwanted consequences.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.