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Senator Hickman, Representative Supica, and esteemed members of the Committee On Veterans and Legal Affairs,

My name is Tyler Backus, and I am submitting this testimony in strong support of **LD 662**, which ensures appropriations for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Liaisons as recommended by the Governor's Advisory Council on Military Sexual Trauma. This measure is essential for addressing the increasing demand for comprehensive support services for survivors of military sexual assault, both nationally and within the state of Maine.

Sexual assault remains a pervasive issue within the U.S. military. In 2023, the Department of Defense (DOD) estimated that **approximately 29,000 service members experienced sexual assault**, though independent research, such as a report from Brown University's Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, suggests that the actual number could be two to four times higher due to widespread underreporting. Furthermore, data indicates that **up to 64% of survivors face retaliation** for reporting these incidents, further discouraging survivors from seeking justice.

Maine is not exempt from this crisis. Reports indicate that the **Maine National Guard has seen an increase in substantiated sexual assault cases**, with survivors voicing concerns over inadequate institutional responses and lack of accountability. With an estimated **one in five Mainers experiencing sexual assault in their lifetime**, the need for MST-specific support services is both urgent and evident.

An often-overlooked consequence of military sexual trauma is its strong correlation with homelessness. Studies have shown that **female veterans who experience MST are at significantly higher risk of homelessness**, with some research indicating they are **two to four times more likely to become homeless** than their male counterparts or female veterans who have not experienced MST. The psychological trauma, compounded by lack of institutional support, frequently leads to job loss, financial instability, and difficulty reintegrating into civilian life. Without dedicated MST Liaisons to provide intervention, advocacy, and resource navigation, survivors are left vulnerable to housing insecurity and homelessness. The Sisters in Arms Center is uniquely equipped in Maine to provide

support as the house has eight rooms to provide housing and because of our dedicated Executive Director being a LCSW so she is equipped to provide the needed support for these veterans.

The underreporting of military sexual assault highlights the necessity of providing survivors with safe and effective avenues for support. MST Liaisons would play a critical role in addressing the unique challenges faced by survivors, ensuring they have access to the necessary resources to facilitate recovery and, if they choose, continue their military service. Appropriating ongoing funding for these positions would guarantee:

1. **Dedicated Advocacy for Survivors** – MST Liaisons would serve as essential contacts for survivors, assisting them with reporting processes, legal proceedings, and access to medical and mental health services.
2. **Reduced Barriers to Reporting** – The presence of MST Liaisons would provide survivors with confidential guidance, increasing trust in the system and encouraging accountability within military structures.
3. **Improved Mental Health and Recovery Services** – Military sexual trauma has significant long-term effects, contributing to PTSD, depression, and increased suicide risk. MST Liaisons would help survivors navigate available resources, ensuring they receive the care they need.
4. **Mitigating Homelessness Among Survivors** – MST Liaisons would connect survivors with housing assistance programs, employment services, and financial support, helping to prevent them from becoming unhoused due to the economic and psychological toll of MST.
5. **Maine's Commitment to Military Service Members** – By supporting LD 662, Maine reinforces its commitment to safeguarding and assisting those who have dedicated their lives to serving our country.

The report linked at the end of this testimony details multiple cases—most notably at Fort Hood, Texas—where soldiers who reported sexual harassment through official channels were later murdered or died by suicide. These incidents underscore the urgent need for reform, and while Fort Hood is an extreme example, this problem is not confined to active-duty service members.

During the early 2010s, my National Guard unit received its annual Sexual Assault Response and Prevention (SARP) training, during which an E-7 made an

inappropriate comment about the trainer's sexual orientation. Despite company leadership, including the commander, being present, no action was taken until the trainer paused the session and returned with state leadership, who then provided additional guidance and remained for the duration of the training. Other incidents in the same unit included the removal of a company commander and the reassignment of a readiness NCO from pre-deployment training due to fraternization; however, no further disciplinary action was taken against the readiness NCO. These examples illustrate the systemic issues that enable a culture of tolerance toward inappropriate behavior and misconduct.

Both national and local cases reinforce the necessity of funding MST Liaisons. This initiative is not just a policy imperative—it is an ethical responsibility. Survivors of military sexual trauma deserve access to the resources necessary for healing, justice, and long-term support. LD 662 ensures that Maine stands with its service members by taking meaningful steps to combat military sexual assault and harassment while also addressing the broader socioeconomic consequences, including homelessness.

I urge you to support this bill and provide the advocacy and care that survivors of military sexual trauma need and deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
Tyler Backus
Sister's In Arms Center Board Member

Referenced study:

https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2023/2024/8.14.24%20Greenburg_Sexual%20Assault%20Crisis_Costs%20of%20War.pdf