

## Testimonial – In Support of LD 875

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Sarah Fisher, I live in Belfast and I am testifying in support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence. I am sharing the testimony of my personal experiences with domestic abuse in hopes that it will compel the Committee to thoroughly contemplate the imminent need to prioritize and increase support for essential services for the victims of domestic violence. Additionally, I hope that the shared testimonies of myself and other survivors will help pave the way for deeper, more comprehensive conversations around the devastating crisis of domestic violence in the state of Maine and abroad and that collectively the voices of survivors will help to facilitate much needed change.

I am a 49-year-old woman that has not known life without domestic abuse and violence. I was raised in a traditional American home with both of my parents. My Dad was a law enforcement officer and Vietnam veteran with PTSD. My Mom was a Registered Nurse and worked full-time. My siblings and myself were raised being exposed to extreme fighting, threats of suicide, homicide and gun violence. My family was moved to Maine by my Dad in 1982 from my mother's home state of Illinois, where my siblings and I were all born and raised. This was his way of isolating us from my mother's family. Verbal and emotional abuse by our Dad toward all members of the household was a daily part of life, and family members did their best to avoid doing or saying anything that could lead to rage-filled outbursts, physical abuse, or other traumatic events. DHHS eventually ordered family counseling after my sister reported to the school guidance counselor about the family fighting, and that her toe had been broken after she had been chased by our angry father through the house. I was kicked out by my Dad at the age of 15 and taken in by my boyfriend's family. I was homeless, eager to be loved, and I felt morally obligated to be committed in marriage because I had been engaging in sexual activity. I did not have an education regarding sex other than to be taught the concept of monogamy by my parents based on religious views. The basic physical aspects of anatomy and sexual intercourse were taught to me in Health class by the school nurse when I was in middle school. Having been raised in what I now recognize as domestic abuse and family dysfunction, I had no basic, let alone comprehensive understanding, education or concept of domestic violence or rape.

At the age of 14 my first several sexual experiences were forced on me by the man my parents would eventually sign a permission slip for me to marry at the age of 16. Initially, I was seeking emotional and physical affection, so I was consenting and even eager to participate in certain levels of physical intimacy, but when I was reluctant to "go all the way" I was raped. I was crying, I was begging him to stop, I was telling him he was hurting me and I was trying to push him off of me. These events coupled with the domestic abuse in my family home of origin lent to my confusion about what I was experiencing and led to the official transition into the next 25 years of my life being entangled in marital abuse and domestic violence. The abuse in my first marriage was all encompassing. While the physical abuse was minimal, it was used effectively early on, and for the duration of the relationship I would feel that I could only stand up for myself or others to a certain degree before my physical safety would be in jeopardy. This experience served as an "invisible leash" that kept me subdued in my responses to abusive and unfair treatment by my husband. The early physical abuse also served as a solid foundation to establish dominance that allowed coercion to become the primary and favored tool of my abuser. I had my first child at 17 years old. I had our second child at 18 years old. I had a set of twins at the age of 20, I had a fifth child at the age of 22, I had baby number six when I was 26, baby number seven at 29, baby number eight came along at the age of 32, I was 35 when baby number nine was born and when my 10th and final child with my first ex-husband was born, I was 37. Many of these pregnancies were the result of intimate

partner violence. I was expected to manage the home entirely by myself, along with all the responsibilities for the children, including home education. I was eager to have more ample provision for our family and I was eager to develop my own skill set to be able to contribute financially to the household. With the support of my mother-in-law, I took night classes to get my GED when I was pregnant with baby number six. I was not allowed by my husband to attend these classes by myself, so he took night classes with me. I took care of the children, and I educated them. I took care of the home, and I worked whenever I was given an opportunity and permission by my husband. I was only allowed by him to work for my mother and a very select few others doing private care and house cleaning. Aside from my tremendous responsibilities, I fully supported my husband by doing all the foundational things necessary for him to invest in his formal education that resulted in his GED and eventually further vocational training/education and certification in two different trades that resulted in two independently owned businesses that continues to be successful in 20 years later. I acquired the financial resources for this endeavor, purchased tools for the business, and took out a loan in my name for him to get a work vehicle. For the first several years of his business I did all the necessary paperwork for customer service, order acquisitions, and advertising while I managed all of the details by myself of running the home and taking care of the children. This included their home education that my husband never assisted in, even though he was the one insisting that the children be homeschooled. Over the years, the children and I endured physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, financial abuse, psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, abuse of our pets and property, sexual abuse, and neglect. Our family would sometimes go for six or seven weeks at a time with no electricity, and I was expected to run our household and take care of the children without it. Most of the time we did not have properly functioning appliances, and it was a fairly common practice for me to have to wash clothes in the bathtub, ring them out by hand, and hang them to dry. For the entirety of the marriage my husband's hyper fixation on violent pornography was regularly imposed on me behind closed doors. In the last two years of the marriage I learned of the extensive sexual abuse that several of our children had endured at the hands of their paternal grandfather. This was a devastating revelation that ultimately became my final straw. I had left many times over the years, but due to my lack of understanding, education, misguided religious beliefs, as well as a lack of emotional, physical, and financial support I always ended up back with him. In November 2015 I left the family home, which I had done several times over the years. I stayed with family friends, and I attended the marriage counseling my husband insisted on after he had refused marital counseling for 25 years. Over the years I had struggled with depression, thoughts of suicide, guilt, and shame because of the past and ongoing abuse. The marriage counselor said that due to the poor condition of my mental and emotional health that my husband was the cause of, that it was dangerous for me to go home at that time. My husband was so angry that he refused to let me see the children, he refused to give me the financial support he was told to while we were in separation, and within a month he had already begun to utilize the court system as a new way to abuse and manipulate me. He filed a PFA based on total fabrication and when I did not willingly surrender my sick two-year-old daughter to the police I was arrested. I spent three days in jail for violating a court order, this was the first and only time in my life I have ever been in trouble with the law.

Jail is where I learned I was a victim of abuse after a crisis counselor came to speak to me there and after she heard me share my life experiences, she informed me that I had been a victim of domestic violence. She gave me a copy of "The power and control wheel" where I was able to immediately, clearly identify many of the different ways that the children and I had been abused over the years. This was also the beginning of my long-standing relationship with domestic violence organizations. New Hope Midcoast immediately stepped in to help with legal representation for me regarding the illegitimate PFA and filed for divorce from my abusive husband simultaneously. Within months of their advocacy and intervention, I was legally divorced

and finally free from that abusive, oppressive marriage!!! New Hope Midcoast was able to provide temporary shelter for my children and I, Advocates were always connecting me to necessary resources for things like paying bills, car repairs, registering my vehicle, connecting me with counseling services, and even being available on a 24-hour helpline just to have support people to talk to anytime of the day. I was so grateful for the many things New Hope Midcoast (New Hope for Women at that time) had done to help give me freedom and a new life, but even with the support I had from these efficacious organizations, unfortunately due to my lack of work history and formal education, even though I had two jobs I found myself unable to provide long-term housing and I became homeless. My ex-husband's abuse tactics did not stop. He found new ways to hurt and harm me post separation and divorce. Shortly after the final separation he started telling lies about me to anyone who would listen, also known as a "smear campaign". He withheld the court ordered child support as a form of financial abuse, a tactic he continues to use. He did not allow me to visit the children that were supposed to be living with me, and he has very intentionally alienated me from almost all of the children, imposing severe emotional distress on all of us.

During this traumatic time in my life, the man that would become my next husband was offering emotional, physical, spiritual and financial support. This man had observed some of the abuse that I endured, and he was insistent that he wanted to spend his life with me and help me get on my feet to become the best version of myself and heal from all I had been through. Since this man did not have children of his own and I was so grateful for the love that was being so intentionally demonstrated toward me, I was happy to have two children with my second husband. I believed the things he told me and all his promises of the things we would do and achieve together. I believed that he was a literal answer to my prayers for a loving and supportive partner. This was the beginning of my education in the "school of hard knocks" about the abuse tactics known as "love bombing" and "future faking". Shortly after we married, I started to notice inconsistencies in the things he would say or accounts of things that happened. Gradually he started revealing more of his temper, he became highly critical, and nothing I could do was ever satisfactory. I felt confused about what I was experiencing. We went to the church we belonged to for marital counseling because fighting was becoming a regular part of life. As time went by my husband started using physical aggression when there were disagreements. This escalated eventually to a point where I was scared for the physical safety of my children and I. The police were called to the home numerous times, and my abusive husband was arrested in April 2023 for three counts of domestic violence. Part of his bail conditions were that he could not talk to me or come back to the family home. Within a few hours he made bail and he was calling me on the phone from a restricted number telling me he was coming to the house. He said he had nothing to lose, and if I didn't let him come back, I would not be able to pay the rent, the bills, or meet other family needs. At this point I had only had sporadic employment in between having children with my second husband. Our youngest child is nonverbal autistic and needs significant support and special education. My husband came back to the family home the same night of his arrest and resided under coercion from April 2023 until July 2023. He was arrested in August 2023 for violating the bail conditions and charged with Felony tampering with a witness, and he took a plea deal in September 2023. That deal gave him a "no contact" order with me for two years and mandatory domestic violence classes.

There was no consideration or provision made by the court for how we would coparent under these circumstances or how we would be able to legally communicate regarding the children that we both had full parental rights and responsibilities for. DHHS also did several family investigations over the years that initiated and substantiated my husband for physical and emotional abuse of the children. I was directed consistently by the police and DHHS to New Hope Midcoast. I connected again with New Hope and eventually reconnected with Hannah Harter Ives. I am

thankful I had already established a relationship with Hannah 10 years prior while going through divorce with my first ex-husband, because she already knew my background and she was an absolute lifesaver!! Hannah has extensive knowledge regarding domestic violence and the resources that are currently available for victims of DV. She has been a sympathetic, nonjudgmental support person, which has been huge because even though the statistics for Intimate Partner Violence revictimization is high, as reported in various studies that are archived in the National Library of Medicine (Risk of revictimization and intimate partner violence: the rate of attachment. Anger and violent behavior of the victim.

Pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) I felt naïve and foolish. While I had others in my life validating my poor self-image and feelings of incompetence for making another bad choice for a partner, and for allowing myself to be deceived. I had Hannah in my corner building me up, helping me survive and connecting me with the necessary support to move towards thriving.

Post separation and divorce from my second husband has proven to be similar to the experience with my first ex-husband. While he cannot abuse me the same ways he could while we were in a relationship and living in the same home as a family, he has capitalized on the ways to manipulate legal systems to continue to harm the children and I. He is currently under his third DHHS investigation since March 2024 regarding the abuse of our children in his home. Despite court orders that he refuses to follow, the findings by DHHS of his abuse toward the children, his criminal history, documented domestic violence, his historical lack of involvement in parenting, and the children's preferences to reside with me, my abusive ex-husband was successful in manipulating others to focus on my reactions to the abuse that was being ignored entirely by the court appointed guardian at Leitem and DHHS. Even though several incidents of abuse, injury, neglect, and losing the children twice while in their father's care during the GAL's and DHHS investigation.

The Guardian ad Leitem made bold statements upon meeting to myself, my attorney and others that he did not care about the prior history of domestic violence. This was obvious by his refusal to address any of the abuse incidents that were reported during his appointment. The result of this unfortunate dynamic is that my children are currently forced to live with their abusive father, despite the history and evidence of his abuse and their hysterical plea to not have to live with him. This was witnessed most recently by the Belfast police and medical staff at the Waldo County General Hospital in the form of the children hysterically crying, and pleading with others that they would not have to go with their Dad when they were discharged from the hospital after they were treated for a viral illness and conjunctivitis at the end of the most recent weekend visit with me.

I have shared the details of some of the most unfortunate and painful experiences my children and I have been through with the hope to help bring a fuller understanding to the Committee of the insidious, often covert and all-encompassing nature of domestic violence. I can say with confidence that I would not have survived those seasons in my life without the support of imperative organizations such as New Hope Midcoast, The Maine coalition to End Domestic Violence, and the grassroots organization Finding Our Voices, founded by Patrisha McLean. All of these organizations have been literal life savers! I am certain that there are other programs and organizations I'm not aware of that have helped my family, but because of Hannah's generosity to facilitate necessary resources on my behalf, I am not always aware of the benefactors. This has been of tremendous support also that Hannah helps bear the load in a multitude of ways, for which I am so grateful. Often getting out of domestic violence is more overwhelming than continuing to navigate it the way you were taught or the way that you adapted to.

When you are coming out of a situation like that, there is typically ongoing abuse and trauma and

as you are trying to adjust to a new normal and expecting your problems will be solved because you're no longer in relationship with your abuser, the rules for the "game" that you never signed up to play changes and you have to learn how to navigate through other ways your abuser continues to inflict damage and abuse. While you're healing from damage that was done, you are now inflicted with new trauma to have to process and deal with. One of the very important ways that I was supported by Hannah at New Hope was with her patience to listen to me, validate my experiences, and then take that information and find the resources that I needed. Often when she could see I was overwhelmed by the continuing post- divorce abuse she would facilitate the connections for me. Hannah Harter Ives with New Hope Midcoast has tirelessly collaborated with DV organizations and has facilitated abundant provision for my family in our time of crisis and dire need. Our rent has been paid for by the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, which allowed for my children and I to stay in our family home for a year and a half after the separation. This was a huge blessing that allowed the children time to adjust to the other major changes that were happening in their lives without having to upset our living arrangements. In addition to that these various necessary organizations have provided resources for my family for electricity, the Internet, phone, attorneys, clothes, gas, heating fuel, car repairs, insurance, Christmas presents for our family, a laptop for my continuing education through Kennebec Valley Community college. This is not by any means an exhaustive list of the provisions that have been made emotionally and physically by these amazing organizations.

In conclusion, domestic violence ruins lives and many people would not be able to survive without the important resources that are provided by the numerous domestic violence organizations in our state. These amazing, empathetic people and their determined, active support gave me assistance, solid direction, tangible provisions and saved my life. For this reason, I ask the Committee to thoughtfully consider the dire need to support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence. Furthermore, I see an opportunity to express the urgency for a Call to Action that Domestic Violence be declared a Public Health Crisis in the State of Maine. I propose that a comprehensive plan be formed at the legislative level to educate our communities and to prioritize funding for restorative programs and treatments. The intended purpose of this would be to facilitate survival for victims, treatments for victims, rehabilitation for abusers, mandated domestic violence awareness education for people in authority and decision-making positions; such as, but not limited to Judges, Guardian ad litems, police, as well as DHHS caseworkers and Supervisors that investigate family matters. It is clear that incidence of domestic violence is rapidly increasing in our state and is in need of being intentionally and specifically addressed. Let's use this opportunity to turn the tide for the State of Maine and be beacon to the rest of the nation that there is a light of hope and that this crisis can be managed with success. Let's keep Maine "the way life should be" for all citizens.