

Testimony of Breene O'Rylee

In Support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

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Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Breene O'Rylee, I live in Aroostook County, and I am writing to share why support for this critical funding is so important.

7 years ago I found myself in a bad relationship that I didn't feel I could get out of. I really didn't even understand half of what was being done to me because no one talks about the abuse that happens in relationships very often, especially when you live in a quiet, rural area. I was with a man for 6 years, married for 4 of them. We had just had the worst fight in our relationship where he hit me, and left taking our daughter stating she could come back once we "figured" out our next move. He also made me call in sick to work so we wouldn't be disturbed, and I couldn't talk to anyone. Once I agreed I would do whatever he wanted, my daughter was given back to me, and I was able to go back to work. Family then reached out and said they had found a way to help me leave, they weren't against me like he told me. That's was when I was introduced to Hope and Justice. They talked to law enforcement and got me hidden for a night until we could make it to a safe house. Once I arrived with my daughter I was asked if I was abused. I immediately said No, that he had hit me recently but only because I had upset him. I was then taken to a room where I was explained what forms of abuse there are. The advocate showed me the power and control wheel and I remember how I felt in that moment. I began crying, wondering how I let things get to that point. He hadn't just abused me by slapping me, but he had isolated me from my sister, and friends. He had abused me verbally and always blamed it on something other than himself. He had me in financial ruin. I was barely making it anymore. I was completely dependent on him even though I was the one that worked full time, and brought in 75% of income. He was giving just enough to keep me going.

The advocate there helped us get settled in the safe house for the weekend. They helped me do paperwork to have a protection order put on him, and to get custody of my daughter. When he had me served with emergency divorce paperwork requesting custody of our daughter, as I was trying to get in to see the judge for my protection order, two Hope and Justice Reps drove me to court to stand in front of the judge in borrowed clothing to fight for my daughter without a lawyer. They were the ones that helped me speak to the judge, and helped me to get clothing out of my house until we could get back in the house. The judge allowed him to stay in my house (a house I owned before we were married) until he could find somewhere else to live. I was then assigned 1 Hope and Justice Representative to work with me for as long as I needed her. She not only helped me find a lawyer, but she helped me with anything that came up. This was the lowest I have ever felt in my life. No one knows what that feels like until you're in that situation wondering how you got there. My person as I will now call her, she never made me feel bad about what I found myself in. She actually explained to me that it happens more than most people realize. There are so many women that find themselves in that situation but it's not broadcasted.

She helped me with all the paperwork that I would get. If I didn't understand some of what the lawyers wanted, she helped me understand what I needed to get, and she would help me get it to the right people. When we got new paperwork from the courts, she translated it to me because some of it is hard to understand for even someone in a professional job. Every lawyer appointment, she was there. Every day spent in court, she was there. She set it up so I never had to see him before we walked into the courtroom, and during breaks. She knew how it would bother someone in my shoes to see the abuser, see the looks from him. She was always my sounding board. Helped me to think about what I would have to talk about, get comfortable about talking about what happened with my husband and I.

When I was faced with DHHS being called in, she helped me through that. At one point I think I would refer to her as my bodyguard. If something happened, and this happened often, I could email her with the new issues that were happening, and she would help me find a solution. She went as far as setting up a meeting with someone she knew in Law Enforcement so we could discuss what he was doing. Due to us having a young child the judge allowed him to text me about our child, but he wasn't supposed to text about anything other than her. He would start the text talking about her, then he would start in on me and get in my head all over again. When I discussed this with my person, she explained he was in violation of the protection order, so I called the law enforcement, provided my text messages, and he was put in jail for many violations of the order.

After court was over, and we were divorced she was still there for me to use as a resource. She knew that I was in financial hardship but didn't want to file bankruptcy. She helped me get a free fill up in my oil tank. It was just one time but to a person that was struggling it meant everything. I hadn't even thought it was possible. I hadn't asked her to do that for me. She just knew that my lawyer wasn't able to get the courts to have him share the financial burden he had put on me since everything was in my name, and he played it off as a lot of it was for the house that he wasn't living in. She called me, told me that they had a program that I could fill out paperwork with her and possibly get some free oil in the middle of winter. To me that was like winning a lottery.

Any time you need someone to talk to about legal stuff you're not sure about, you can call them instead of a lawyer that will charge you \$200 per hour to get their input. It doesn't take the place of a lawyer if you need to do something with the court system, but it's a way to get information until you know if you need to go back to court. There is so much they know about because of the training they do. The best thing about them is that everything is confidential. They can't talk to anyone for you, or about you without your written consent. That is huge to someone that wants to stay anonymous.

When you move on with your life, and not really needing to see Hope and Justice anymore, they don't forget about you. My ex-husband had been ordered to take batterers intervention as part of the divorce, and when he was put in front of another judge for other charges he needed to face, my person called me out of the blue to let me know that he had finally completed his batterers intervention course. We then met in her office to talk about what that could mean. I then explained that he hadn't been paying his child support like he was supposed for the longest time but that had changed in the last month or so. She explained that he might be doing this in order to take me back to court for custody of my daughter. Covid had just finished, and my daughter had to stop therapy due to no in-person therapy happening during covid. My person helped me find someone new for my daughter to see since her old therapist wasn't taking any patients back that had stopped seeing

her. Once she was back in therapy and I got paperwork he was taking me back to court, my person helped me find a lawyer and came to all my appointments with me. She came to court like she had done before. Her role in Hope and Justice had changed, she didn't have to come with me. She could have given me one of the other women in the organization but she didn't. She continued to be that person that was there for me, that I could count on that wasn't getting anything out of doing that. She wasn't a lawyer I was paying \$200.00 per hour to be there. I wasn't paying anything for her help. In the world we live in today, there isn't much that you can get for free. You typically pay for everything you want, or need in life. Hope and Justice isn't that way. Once they have been in your life, and helped you get through dark times, they never close the door on you.

Even now, 7 years later they are still there for me. My ex-husband hurt another woman almost a year ago now. When that woman reached out to me to tell me that my daughter wouldn't be seeing her Dad for a few days because he was in jail for doing something to her, I told her to reach out to Hope and Justice. After talking to her I called the office and spoke to one of the woman that talked to me that first time in the safe house. She talked to me about what was happening, and how that might affect my daughter. She suggested I reach out to my lawyer to put him on notice, and offered to talk to me anytime I needed someone to talk to. If I have to go to court again, I know that I can ask one of them to come with me if I think I need that. Once you've been abused by someone, it's hard to be comfortable in the same room with that person. They understand that.

I have told people to reach out to Hope and Justice, and I will continue to do that. This organization needs to be able to continue to do the work they do in our community. They are the light in someone's darkness.