



MCEDV.

The Maine Coalition
to End Domestic Violence

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Testimony by Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director, Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence
In favor of LD 875 An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence
Before the Joint Standing Committees of Health and Human Services
March 19, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence. I am testifying in support of LD 875, which seeks to increase by \$4 million per year the amount of ongoing state general funds supporting essential services for victims of domestic violence.

It is my privilege to be here representing the extraordinary advocates at Maine's Domestic Violence Resource Centers. These advocates are the people you call when you are scared, when you find yourself in a hell you did not choose when you promised to love and cherish your life partner, when you don't know what to do to break free and not be broken in the process. Domestic violence advocates are the people who law enforcement officers call when they are scared about what will happen to a victim of assault. Advocates are the people you call when you are scared that your grown-up child is suffering abuse, and you don't know what to do. Advocates are the people you call to organize a vigil after a domestic violence perpetrator has shattered your peaceful town by causing a standoff with police and killing his family.

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, less than \$2 million (\$1,980,308) are ongoing state general funds. For comparison, the state dollars supporting this work in FY2001 were \$1.3 million.

The need for services has outpaced our ability to staff this critically needed, trauma-informed, specialized crisis work, increasing burnout and staff turnover. DVRC staff are not paid sufficiently, and there are simply not enough of them. In the past 5 years, like all employers, DVRCs have had to raise wages to recruit and retain advocates. In order to do that and sustain good benefit packages with flat funding in the DHHS contract, the number of full-time advocates funded with the DHHS contract has reduced dramatically, from 138 in 2019 to 101 in 2025, a 27% reduction. And still 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, over the past 5 years the costs of everything have increased. For example, the Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers operate 12 shelters and as many outreach sites, and heating costs are up 28% and electricity 59%.

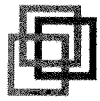
In 2024, Maine's Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers served nearly 15,000 people, of whom 8,572 accessed services through the 24-hour helpline. Advocates fielded over 19,000 calls to their crisis helplines and engaged with victims in 20,000 additional calls. The Centers serve more than 500 Maine people on any given day. About 30% of the people assisted are first connected to 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 legal advocacy across Maine's 26 District Courts, and provided 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 navigating their paths to safety for both themselves and their children. At least half of the people we serve have one child or more.

From 2008 to 2019 the total DHHS contract was essentially flat funded, while costs continued to rise. It is important to note that within that contract total, the amount of state general funds actually decreased from \$1.7 million in 2008 to \$1 million in 2019 as federal grant funds were added and subtracted. Thanks to Governor Mills and the 129th Legislature, the 2020 contract included an increase of \$1.2 million¹.

The DHHS contract was essentially stagnant at \$5.7 million from the early 2000's until 2018 when there was an increase of \$425,000 to establish an emergency shelter for victims of sex trafficking, \$175,000 to partially fund the Domestic Violence/Child Protection Liaison Program, and \$300,000 to support shelter staffing in small part to address the added challenges that the opiate epidemic brought to shelter work. Along with \$100,000 to partially fund MCEDV to administer the newly consolidated contract, the statewide total was \$7.8 million in 2019. In short, during the 20-year period from 2008 to 2019, the only funding increases in the DHHS contract were to partially fund new work, not to address the ongoing increase in the cost of doing business and meeting increased demand for services.

¹ The 129th Legislature appropriated these funds as one-time for the biennium from the Fund for a Healthy Maine. The 130th Legislature appropriated the equivalent amount as ongoing state general funds.



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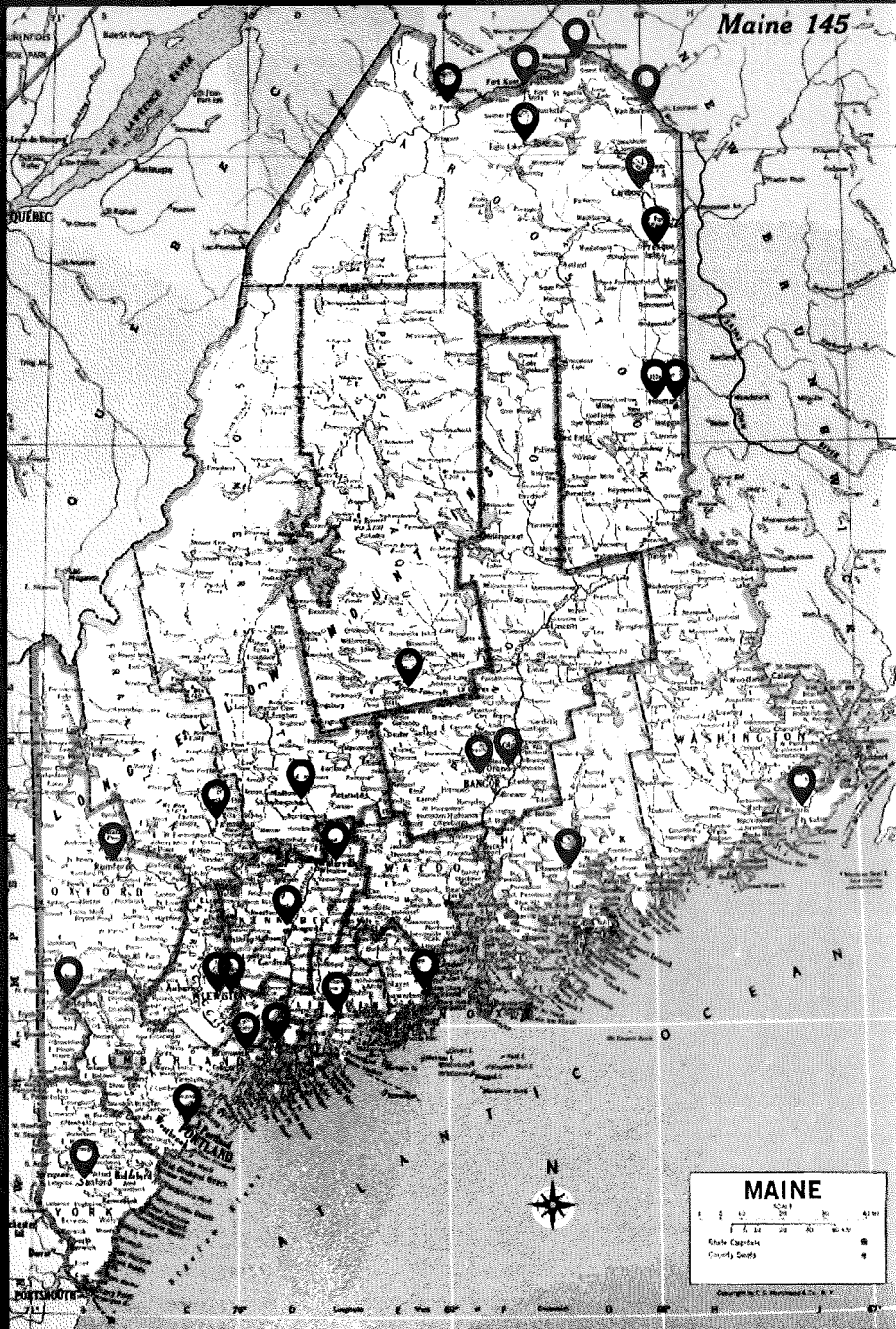
Maine has historically depended almost entirely on federal dollars to support domestic violence services. In addition to the federal funds that are included in the DHHS contract, all the DV Resource Centers have worked hard to secure direct, competitive federal grants to supplement the DHHS contract 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.

I have never heard anyone suggest that our work is anything but essential. Domestic Violence 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 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.

Thank you.

Domestic Violence Resource Centers & Outreach Locations



In addition to their resource centers and other outreach locations, DVRCs all have in-person presences at courts and CPS offices in their districts.

ANDROSCOGGIN, FRANKLIN & OXFORD

Safe Voices

- Lewiston
- Farmington
- Rumford

Culturally Specific Services:

Immigrant Resource Center of Maine & Her Safety Net

- Lewiston

AROOSTOOK

Hope & Justice Project

- St. Francis
- Eagle Lake
- Fort Kent
- Madawaska
- Van Buren
- Caribou
- Presque Isle
- Houlton

CUMBERLAND

Through These Doors

- Portland
- Bridgton
- Brunswick

HANCOCK & WASHINGTON

Next Step Domestic Violence Project

- Ellsworth
- Machias

KENNEBEC & SOMERSET

Family Violence Project

- Skowhegan
- Waterville
- Augusta

KNOX, LINCOLN, SAGadahoc & WALDO

New Hope Midcoast

- Rockland
- Damariscotta
- Bath

PENOBSCOT & PISCATAQUIS

Partners for Peace

- Bangor
- Orono
- Dover-Foxcroft

YORK

Caring Unlimited

- Sanford

We are the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence.

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NEW HOPE
MIDCOAST





Domestic Violence Resource Centers Critical Resource Under Stress

LD 875: An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence Resource Centers (DVRCs) provide 24/7 critical, wrap-around services for survivors of domestic abuse and their children and essential support and education for community response systems:

- 24/7 helpline
- 13 emergency shelters across the state
- Civil and criminal court advocacy across 27 District Courts
- Individual advocacy and system navigation
- Support for economic stability
- Collaborative response with community partners



SINCE FY19: STAFFING CHALLENGES

Statewide decrease in the number of staff available to do this critical work



There has been high turnover of advocacy positions due to:

- Need for higher wages
- Impact of the work, particularly from helpline coverage overnight and on weekends



Salaries for advocates statewide are not livable wages and are well below the average for workers in comparable fields, such as DHHS case workers.



The cost of staffing has increased by more than 30% statewide.



The need for services has outpaced our the ability to staff the work. Each individual advocate is called on to do more.

VOLUNTEERS HAVE DECREASED AS HELPLINE CALLS HAVE INCREASED



The number of volunteers taking helpline calls has decreased by 54% statewide.



Calls to the statewide helpline have increased. Certain regions have been particularly impacted: Safe Voices (152%), Partners for Peace (53%), and New Hope Midcoast (112%).



The number of people needing our help has increased, with the greatest increases at Safe Voices (44%) and Partners for Peace (37%).

SINCE FY19: OPERATIONAL COSTS HAVE INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY



Heating costs at resource centers and shelters has risen 28% statewide.

The cost of electricity has increased 59%.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SURVIVORS? These cost increases, plus the need to increase salaries to recruit and retain workers, all with flat or reduced funding, means there are fewer advocates to do more and more intense work. As a result, DVRCs have had to reduce services, some of which are listed below:

- Reduced capacity to engage with survivors meaningfully beyond the crisis that led to the helpline call, and address the broader safety needs of both the adult survivor and their children.
- Reduced shelter capacity, rural outreach, and office staffing.
- Fewer attorneys available in rural Maine and reduced ability to support survivors with criminal legal system response.
- Reduced services for children and parenting support
- Reduced in-person support groups.
- Reduced school-based prevention education.
- Fewer advocates available

State funds are needed to ensure critical services are accessible throughout Maine.