

## Testimony in Support of LD 875

Good Morning, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and the distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Christine Bergeron, but I prefer to be called Ceci. I currently reside in Biddeford, Maine. I am the mother of two young boys. I'm a hard worker, a good friend, and a kind/empathetic human. I am also a SURVIVOR of domestic violence!

I stand before you today to testify in support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence.

Those words "stand before you today" likely don't have much of an impact on you yet, but they certainly do to me.

The ONLY reason I am alive, standing here before you today is BECAUSE of the support I have received for the past 2 ½ years. And due to the support I CONTINUE to receive. Personally, I have benefited from the services provided by non-profits in the counties of Cumberland, Androscoggin, and York. Each one has played an essential role in my survival, healing, and growth.

Escaping DV isn't an easy thing to do.

Even survivors will tell you they never considered how much worse it can get once you do leave.

For me, all I could focus on was my immediate survival, and then the work that followed to slowly rebuild.

I had no idea that 2+ years later I would still rely heavily on weekly support groups, communicating with advocates, and safety planning. I am why funding is essential, my children are why, along with all the survivors who stand before you today. WE ARE WHY FUNDING IS ESSENTIAL!

In an alternate reality, had the funding not been available for me, it's more than likely my boys would be coming up on the 3rd anniversary of their mother's death.

Every survivor's story is unique, and mine cannot be broken down to one "singular incident."

The abuse I endured was slow, calculated, methodical, and daily for over a decade. I went from a happy, healthy, shining being, to an 80 lb, scared of her own shadow, insecure, unstable, non-existent soul.

My abuser is my ex-husband. My abuser's immediate family is very powerful, connected, and wealthy. His family owns one of the most well-known personal injury law firms in Maine, and let

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me tell you, they mean business. I have been self-representing myself the entire time against his lawyer whose slogan once was "divorce and family law for wealthy families".

I was a SAHM, that perfect cookie cutter PTO mom, the "every kid in the neighborhood comes to play in your yard" mom. Life was "almost" perfect to an outsider looking in.

But it was all a lie. Every single day I was being mentally, emotionally, financially, and sexually abused.

My abuser never put his hands on me, but he sure knew how to put me in a corner. And our kids saw it all.

I had attempted to leave several times. But as a SAHM, without any real income of my own, those attempts failed. I was constantly seeking advice, ideas, and resources online.

I had become a statistic.

After the birth of our youngest, things only seemed to get worse. Covid hit, I had a 5 year old, and 4 month old at home, and the level of control he had increased tenfold.

Eventually, I started to see our youngest exhibit the same behavioral issues had happened years before with our oldest.

The daily trauma they were witnessing was affecting their developing minds, as well as eating away at my own mind, body, and soul.

It was in that realization that I felt the weight of my responsibility, not only to my boys, or myself, but to society. I could not let my sons grow up believing that this is what love is supposed to look like.

So for the final time I asked for a divorce.

At first I was naive, I thought we could co-parent and cohabitate. That didn't last long. Before I knew it, things were worse than ever.

I was scared for my life.

I truly believed he wanted me dead. Not by his hands, but mine.

I was homeless.

I was terrified.

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No money, just a suitcase, and my car. The one I had driven for 8 years. Managed the repairs, registrations, and inspections for. The one in his name.

Eventually he took that from me too.

The final blow was when he stopped me from seeing our children since I was homeless. His family, wealth, power, and control combined with my broken physical and mental state left me utterly hopeless. I truly believed I would not survive.

But I did. I contacted Through These Doors who eventually transferred me to the care of Safe Voices. My situation was deemed one that could qualify me to live in their Safe House, versus their shelter.

I remember walking into that house for the first time and feeling a small bit of safety and hope again. Over the course of almost a year there I worked on obtaining employment, therapy, a vehicle, and the person I used to be before all of this. Advocates supported me mentally, and emotionally. They helped me rebuild myself.

I used the Shelter Plus Care voucher I was approved for with the help of advocates, to apply for housing with no luck. After using all of the extensions allowed, my voucher ran out. Typically, folks just have to reapply when that happens, but I received news that Shelter Plus Care vouchers were on hold indefinitely, and I didn't qualify for any other types.

I was CRUSHED! All that hard work, down the drain again. Or so I thought. The advocates, and administration recognized all the effort I made over the months, how hard I was fighting to rebuild a life for me and my sons. So I was offered a temporary solution. Upon finding housing, they would use the grant money they received to pay my rent each month for a full year.

I have since found a beautiful 2-bedroom apartment in Biddeford to share with my boys. I've been here over a year, but my healing journey isn't over.

I would not be alive today, to stand before you and share my story, if it wasn't for the support and efforts of the 3 DV non-profits I worked with, and the MANY advocates that believed in me.

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyers, and the distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, this funding is VITAL to the survival of countless women and children across the state of Maine. As you weigh your choice whether to support LD 875 or not, I ask that you take these things into consideration...

- Think of me
- Remember my story
- Picture my face before you
- Imagine my children who will grow to understand what love is really supposed to be