

Testimony 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 Catherine Lavallee, I live in Waterville, and I am testifying in support of LD 875, an Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence.

I want to share my story, not just to highlight my journey, but to emphasize the critical importance of funding essential services for victims of domestic violence, like those provided by the Family Violence Project. I hope to speak not only as a survivor myself, but as a voice for those who are most certainly still suffering in silence, as I did for 25 years.

For years, I lived in a cycle of fear and confusion, all while trying to protect my children from their father's abusive behavior towards me. I first learned about the Family Violence Project through posters in my doctor's office. Each time I visited, I would read those messages, recognizing, deep down, that they applied to my life. Yet, I was coping—I thought I was managing the situation, using every strategy I could think of to shield my children from the reality of our home environment.

But in March of 2023, everything changed. The abuse escalated to the point where I could no longer ignore the danger; I had to leave, for the sake of my children and myself. In that moment of desperation, I reached out to the Family Violence Project helpline.

I'll never forget the compassion and empathy I felt from the person on the other end of the phone. She listened to me—really listened—and provided a sense of calm and understanding in the midst of chaos. I was overwhelmed, struggling to organize my thoughts, and uncertain about how to move forward. But she helped me create a safety plan, step by step. That plan was essential—it helped me make sense of everything, gave me clarity, and reassured me that there were options. I felt like I was finally not alone. Having someone help me in that moment was invaluable.

I left my children's father that day, planning to leave for good. I am fortunate to have parents who could offer me both financial support and a safe place to stay as I began to rebuild my life. But for many others living with domestic violence, that kind of support is not available. Many survivors don't have the resources or the family backing to make the decision to leave, and that is why services like the Family Violence Project are so incredibly important.

What made my situation even harder was the shame I felt. I was deeply ashamed of the fact that I had built a family with someone who was also abusive. It was confusing. There were times when he was kind and loving, and I wished that he could always be that person. But I also knew that being wonderful at times didn't erase the reality of the emotional, verbal, and physical abuse I had endured. The helpline helped me come to terms with this—that abuse is never excusable, no matter how good someone can be in other

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moments. The understanding that the cruelty wasn't my fault, and that I didn't have to accept it, was a huge part of what helped me finally leave.

The shame of being in an abusive relationship, of having been part of something that wasn't healthy, is a burden that far too many survivors carry alone. The fear of judgment, the fear of being misunderstood, and the fear of having to admit to the abuse can keep people trapped in silence. Many survivors live with someone who is both wonderful and terrible, never knowing what a healthy relationship is supposed to feel like. And this cycle affects not only the adults involved but also the children, who grow up thinking this is normal.

That's why funding these services is critical—not just for the immediate safety of victims, but for the long-term health of our communities. Every time a survivor is empowered to leave, the cycle of abuse has a chance of being broken. The chances of children growing up to either become abusers or be abused themselves is lessened. Providing services like those offered by the Family Violence Project is an investment in the future of our state. It's a long-term investment in reducing domestic violence, child abuse, and the generational trauma that comes with it.

I can never thank the wonderful people at the Family Violence Project enough. They gave me the strength to leave, and they helped me put together a plan for my future. They also helped my children's father through the Changework Program. Today, he respects my decision to leave the relationship, and we co-parent cooperatively and respectfully for the sake of our children. I'm proud of us both for putting our children's needs above everything else. I truly believe that this wouldn't have been possible without the support of the Family Violence Project.

I worry about what Maine will look like without these vital services for survivors. Survivors of domestic violence deserve to have access to the resources and support they need to regain their lives, to break free from cycles of abuse, and to build healthier futures for their children. We must invest in these services, because giving survivors options gives them the power to take back control from their abusers.

Thank you for your time and for considering the importance of these critical services.