

Testimony of Caroline McKuen  
In Support of LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence  
March 19, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Caroline McKuen, I am from the midcoast, and I am writing to share why support for this critical funding is so important.

In the summer of 2019, I fled a domestic violence situation in New York and ended up in Maine. I had with me only my children, a few clothes and keepsakes, two cats, and a small collection of books. The books might seem an odd choice for someone in a crisis, but folded into the binding of these volumes was several hundred dollars I had managed to hide in the final months of my escape plan. I had bet that my abuser would never open my old college copy of *Paradise Lost*, and I had been right. Everything else—my pretty little home with the rose garden I had carefully planted and tended, my kids' dressers and beds, my teaching job—all of it was gone. It was the price I paid for safety. I wanted to live. I wanted my children to be safe in their home.

Although lack of money and the loss of our home were obstacles, the greatest challenge before me was ignorance. Even though I was born an American citizen, I grew up in Asia. I had married my abuser while I was still a teenager newly arrived in the United States. He kept me isolated, and he told me every day that I was stupid and that I would never survive on my own. I had only a vague idea of how to sign a lease, and I knew nothing at all about food pantries or heating assistance. I had a rusted-out van that couldn't pass inspection, and the title was still in my abuser's name, but I didn't know how to even begin looking for another car. Worst of all, I knew nothing about the court system. I didn't know protection orders existed, much less how to apply for one. I had never set foot in a courtroom.

The only resource I found right away was Lakeview Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Rockport. The pastor and some of the congregants there heard about my desperate situation. They brought my children food and helped me find a reliable car. Best of all, they gave me the hotline number for New Hope Midcoast—a resource I had no idea even existed.

The months that followed were a confusing flurry of PFA hearings, divorce court, custody hearings for my minor child, and a guardianship case for my adult autistic son. Looking back, I wonder how I got through it all. But New Hope stood by me every step of the way. They were with me at the protection order hearing in the middle of the COVID shutdown. My daughter called the New Hope Midcoast hotline when her dad sent her photos of guns and when he sat outside the church in his car because it was the one place he knew where she would be and what time. I called the New Hope Midcoast hotline when my abuser took my son and refused to return him unless I gave up my share of the equity in the home.

Nothing about that period in my life was easy. But almost six years later, my kids and I (and even our cats) are all thriving. Our home is a place of safety and joy. My autistic son is an exceedingly popular dishwasher at the famous Moody's diner. My older daughter is a school teacher. My younger daughter is a straight-A student at the University of Southern Maine. And I now work as a

legal advocate for New Hope Midcoast, helping other victims of domestic violence navigate the court system.

I always tell my clients that being a domestic abuse survivor is like being buried under a collapsed house. You are hurt and terrified, and at the same time, everything is piled on you. It's dark and heavy. You don't know how to get out. But then someone comes up and says, "Let's begin here." And they help you move the heavy beams one at a time—food assistance until you can get work, medical care for injuries, protection orders, custody hearings... one at a time, they help you move something off you, and you feel just a little bit better. And finally one day you stand up, and you realize you are going to be okay.

That is what New Hope Midcoast and other domestic violence resource centers do every day. They are the friend helping to dig people out of the wreckage of domestic abuse. Services offered at places like New Hope Midcoast make it possible for victims of violence to live, work, and raise children in safety. It is absolutely crucial that the state of Maine support these resources that make our communities safer and give hope to victims of domestic violence.