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Testimony of Representative Michele Meyer presenting
**LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic
Violence**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Senator Ingwersen, esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Representative Michele Meyer, serving the people of southern Maine's District 150, all of Eliot and parts of Kittery and South Berwick. I am honored to introduce LD 875, An Act to Fund Essential Services for Victims of Domestic Violence.

No woman, no child, no family should live in fear. Everyone has a right to a safe, self-determined life free of violence. Domestic violence assaults comprise nearly half of all reported assaults in Maine, and domestic violence homicides comprise nearly half of the homicides here. Abusive relationships are extremely complex situations, and it takes enormous courage to leave. It is the safety and support of our state's domestic violence resource centers that make it possible for those trapped in abusive relationships to find their way to a life free from the trauma of abuse and violence.

For years, Maine's domestic violence resource centers (DVRCs) have been on the front lines, providing shelter, counseling, and crisis intervention for survivors. These programs save lives. Over the course of more than four decades, the movement to combat domestic violence in Maine has evolved, building strong networks of support, advocacy, and prevention efforts.

Maine has eight regional domestic violence resource centers, who are relied upon to be our state's primary response to victims of domestic abuse and violence. These DV resource centers provide a wide range of services to victims of domestic abuse and violence, collectively serving more than 14,000 people last year.

They operate 12 of Maine's emergency shelters – in some counties, the shelter operated by the domestic violence resource center is the only emergency shelter available. Last year, these

shelters provided refuge for 542 people, 218 of whom were children who accompanied their protective parent.

All of the services offered at domestic violence resource centers are free, confidential, and available 24/7. Without adequate, ongoing, and reliable funding to support these essential services, survivors will not have access to critical support and resources that are necessary for healing, rebuilding, and thriving.

Maine's DV resource centers serve as critical partners to law enforcement, child protective services, and our district courts – helping to support each of those systems' responses to what are usually their most complex cases. More than 30% of those served by the DV provider network last year were connected to their services by police, child protective staff, or court clerks after those systems became involved with the family. Without the partnership of Maine's DVRCs, each of these systems would be less effective in their responses to domestic violence. It is a partnership forged in a shared mission to help victims facing immense challenges find a way forward to a new life.

Domestic violence services in Maine have reached a precarious juncture, and it is up to all of us in the Legislature to prioritize the solution. The state contract for domestic violence services has not increased for six fiscal years, and that increase six years ago, which was supported unanimously by this committee, came after 20 years of flat funding. Costs have increased exponentially, both the costs to employ the highly trained advocates needed to staff these centers, and the costs to run the centers and shelters themselves. Flat funding over a significant period of years, combined with a stark drop in volunteers, has already resulted in painful cuts to services. This bill supports the continued availability of the essential services that victims of domestic violence need in all of our communities across the state by increasing by \$4 million annually.

Today, you will hear from some of the service providers and the community partners who rely on them for support in their own response. Funding for domestic violence services is homicide prevention, it is ultimately cost savings, and it is a moral responsibility our state has to some of the most vulnerable in our communities.

And you will hear today from survivors who benefited from community-based domestic violence services, I among them, who know with certainty that these services are what made the difference for them. Survivors who -- often with their children in tow -- took a leap of faith from the violence that defined their very existence into the hope and opportunity our domestic violence resource centers provide for a safe, stable new beginning.

It is my hope that our committee will join in strong unanimous support of Maine's domestic violence providers and the people depending on them -- and prioritize this funding. I know personally how life-changing these services are. Thank you for your compassionate consideration, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

Domestic Violence Advocacy in Maine

2024 - 2019: A Story in Numbers

Domestic Violence Resource Centers are struggling to keep up with increasing demand for crisis services amidst rising costs, decreases in funding, high staff turnover, and a sharp decline in volunteerism, much of which was precipitated by the pandemic. Here's what it looks like:



2024

2019

People Served by DVRCs, Total:

14,810

13,879

DVRCs are serving more people, due mainly to an increase in demand from concerned others seeking support to do their part.

People Served Directly Experiencing Abuse:

12,385

12,117

The number of survivors being served is steady, representing a rebound in services from early COVID when the number of survivors served dipped.

People Served by DVRC Crisis Helplines:

8,572

7,042

The number of people calling DVRC helplines increased 22% since 2019. In 2023, it spiked to 38%. The 24-hour helpline is the core service offered by DVRCs and serves as the gateway to additional support.

Crisis Helpline Calls:

19,279

16,485

The number of calls to DVRC helplines increased 17% during this period. Helpline calls are considered crisis and require immediate response from advocates.

Trained Staff Advocates Funded by DHHS Contract:

101

138

From 2019 to 2025, the number of full-time staff funded by the DHHS contract has reduced by 27%.

Trained Volunteer Advocates:

81

178

The number of volunteers answering the helpline decreased 54%, increasing staff workload, decreasing staff capacity to offer other services, and contributing to staff turnover across the state.

Staff Turnover Rate, 2019-2024:

A total of 221 staff positions turned over statewide, an average of 28 positions per DVRC. Most common reasons cited: the need for higher pay and the impact of the work, especially the demand for coverage of the helpline on nights and weekends.

Heating Costs:

DVRC heating costs for resource centers and shelter buildings have risen 28% statewide.

Cost of Electricity:

DVRC electricity costs have risen 59% statewide.

Domestic violence remains a driver of violent crime and homicide in Maine, but our primary response has reached a breaking point. Change starts with increased state investment in this critical, transformative work.