

February 14, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Keri Kapaldo, and I am a resident of Hampden and a Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner (SAFE) nurse at St. Joseph Hospital in Bangor. I am submitting this testimony in strong support of LD 117, which provides critical funding for sexual assault services, including increased wages for sexual assault advocates.

As a forensic nurse, I have worked alongside sexual assault advocates during some of the most vulnerable moments in a patient's life. When a victim of sexual assault comes to the hospital, they are often in crisis—frightened, uncertain, and carrying the weight of trauma. Advocates provide immediate emotional support throughout the forensic exam process and ensure survivors never feel alone. They help coordinate resources such as emergency transportation, assist in contacting loved ones, and provide comfort and reassurance to ease anxiety.

In 2024, the St. Joseph Hospital SAFE Program cared for 70 acute sexual assault patients, resulting in over 225 advocate hours for hospital accompaniment. Additionally, we consulted with 140 other patients who disclosed acute or historical sexual assault, providing referrals to advocacy agencies and direct support at the time of care. That's at least 210 times a survivor heard the life-changing words, *"I believe you"* and *"I'm here for you."* They are a hand to hold, a midnight food run when the survivor hasn't eaten in days, and companion to color with in the moments after the unthinkable. Because of the support they provide, I and other SAFEs can focus on doing our job collecting vital evidence of sexual assault and providing critical healthcare to victims.

Despite the essential nature of their work, advocates are not paid a livable wage. Many are on call overnight and on weekends, yet their compensation does not reflect the intensity of their role. The result is a workforce crisis—61% of sexual assault advocates left their positions in 2023 after a similar bill went unfunded, and almost half of those remaining have considered leaving due to low pay. Without action, survivors will lose access to these crucial services.

LD 117 is a necessary step toward stabilizing this workforce and ensuring survivors continue to receive the care they deserve. Advocates do not hesitate to show up for survivors in their most critical moments—Maine must show up for them. I urge you to support LD 117. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



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