

DISABILITY
RIGHTS
MAINE 

March 20, 2025

Senator Henry Ingwersen, Chair
Representative Michele Meyer, Chair
Committee on Health and Human Services
Cross Office Building, Room 209
Augusta, Maine 04333

Re: L.D. 117, *An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services*

Dear Senator Ingerswen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Katrina Ringrose, and I serve as the Deputy Director of Disability Rights Maine (DRM), Maine's Protection and Advocacy agency for people with disabilities. I am here today to express our strong support for LD 117, which seeks to fund sexual assault services statewide and specifically hire an advocate within DRM to address the unique barriers faced by individuals with disabilities.

As the state's only cross-disability advocacy organization, DRM has been advancing the rights of individuals with disabilities for over 45 years. Our advocates and attorneys are experienced in creating positive change through negotiation, public policy reform, training, and litigation. DRM operates a number of federal, state, and private grants and programs that serve individuals of all ages and across a wide spectrum of disabilities.

The funding provided through LD 117 is absolutely essential, not only to address the gaps in services for individuals with disabilities, but also to safeguard the long-term sustainability of vital victim services in Maine. A recent needs assessment conducted by DRM, in collaboration with the Maine Coalition to End Sexual Assault (MECASA), Speaking Up For Us (SUFU), and the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP), found staffing and turnover issues within sexual assault response agencies make it difficult for individuals with disabilities to know and trust the people within the agencies they interact with, resulting in feelings of distrust

toward the very individuals they rely on for critical support and services. We heard directly from advocates at Maine's Sexual Assault Centers that low wages are a key driver behind departures. This turnover is eroding the very infrastructure needed to support survivors of sexual violence.

It is also critical to highlight that individuals with disabilities are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing sexual violence than their non-disabled peers. National studies estimate that nearly 80% of people with disabilities are sexually assaulted on more than one occasion, and half of these individuals experience more than 10 victimizations. The risk is particularly heightened for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Despite this elevated risk, individuals with disabilities continue to face insurmountable barriers when trying to access support services, both in prevention and in response. Many sexual assault prevention programs are not designed to accommodate individuals with disabilities, leaving them without critical information and resources that could help prevent sexual assault in the first place. Furthermore, when individuals with disabilities experience sexual violence, they often encounter additional barriers to accessing the criminal justice system and other services, further impeding their ability to seek justice or receive support.

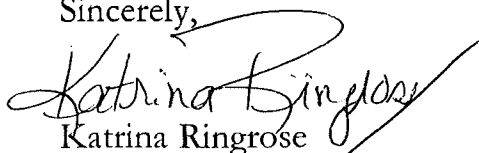
This funding will allow DRM to hire an advocate who will specifically work to address these barriers and directly represent individuals with disabilities who are experiencing sexual violence. This advocate will ensure that survivors receive the appropriate support, resources, and accommodations they need to heal and recover.

Without this essential funding, we risk the collapse of existing services for survivors, including those with disabilities, leaving them with inadequate or unsustainable support when they need it most. The stakes are high—absent funding, Maine's ability to provide critical victim services will be severely compromised.

We urge you to support this bill and help make Maine a safer and more inclusive place for all individuals.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,


Katrina Ringrose
Deputy Director