

March 20th, 2025

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

My name is Frida Smith-Hess and I am a resident of Belfast. I am submitting testimony in support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

I am a registered nurse and an adult, adolescent, and pediatric state credentialed sexual assault forensic examiner, or SAFE. Though I'm based in Belfast, I have the privilege of caring for patients after sexual assault at hospitals in Waldo, Penobscot, Knox, and Lincoln counties.

As a SAFE, my priorities are medical. My job is to care for patients in the immediate aftermath of an assault through a medical forensic examination. SAFEs assess, treat, and document injuries, test for and prophylactically treat STIs, and initiate a coordinated response with other systems based around the victim's choices for seeking healing and justice.

My care ends at the doors to the hospital, but my patient's needs do not. Advocates are the ones who walk with survivors through the recovery process. Advocates are there for them in court; in interviews with police; by phone when they can't sleep; there for them regardless of when, where, or how the survivor experienced violence. Whether they contact an advocate through the hotline or an in-hospital accompaniment, these professionals provide essential support at every step afterwards.

I am so fortunate to work with advocacy agencies who, at the moment, can accompany every survivor of sexual assault seeking care in our hospitals. These examinations take hours. Hours of talking about the assault, of physical examination, of photography and swabs for evidence collection, of medical care and treatment. For now, my patients don't have to spend those hours alone. They move through the exam with an expert advocate at their side. But I worry about this being the case in the future if we can't keep good advocates in this work.

This is a service in the truest meaning of the word. Sexual assault is a way to tell someone that they don't matter. But when an advocate arrives at the bedside the message is clear: you matter and we care about you. More than one patient has told me that they didn't think anyone would actually leave their home at three am for them. That no one has ever shown up for them. That they arrived paralyzingly overwhelmed but now have a plan. That, in the overwhelm, they could never have called the statewide hotline and asked for this on their own.

We hear and see the worst things people do to each other. We carry those patients with us. So, why would anyone, advocate or nurse, do this work?

Because it needs to be done, and survivors deserve this support. But it's really hard work.

Put yourself in an advocate's shoes: would you commit to go the hospital at any time of day, listen to the details of assaults, walk with survivors of sexual assault as they navigate their care?

Would you do it if you couldn't make enough money to support yourself?

We lost 63% of our advocates in 2023. 70% of them said inadequate pay was the reason. Without appropriate funding for advocacy we leave survivors on their own as they navigate the complex physical, emotional, and legal recovery process – we tell them again that they don't matter. For the sake of all the work we do to give survivors options for justice and healing, please pass and fund LD 117.