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Testimony of Representative Holly B. Stover in support of
LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. I am Representative Holly Stover, serving House District 48. I am pleased to testify in support of LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services.

There is a statewide fiscal crisis that is impacting Maine's Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers. We have all experienced increased inflationary costs in our household budgets, and at times, some of us may be challenged to make ends meet. For those individuals who choose to work at Sexual Assault Service Centers, this is exacerbated by extremely low base salaries that have been set primarily due to the amount of state and federal funds these centers receive. We are before you today to address the issues of staff salaries in the Sexual Assault Service Centers. You will hear from many people today who will share the impact of the work that they do every day.

In my professional career, I had the opportunity to serve as the state's Director of Domestic and Sexual Violence. This position allowed me to be directly involved in the services and programs offered through Maine's seven Sexual Assault Support Centers and Child Advocacy Centers. As a result, I have developed long-standing professional relationships with these amazing people who do work that some of us don't necessarily think about regularly. They provide a vast array of services that range from prevention with school-aged children to crisis intervention and support to survivors of sexual assault. In addition, they must be on call and available to assist and support survivors who arrive at emergency departments across the state and often stay involved with a person through the long and challenging road to court proceedings.

There are seven Sexual Assault Support Centers across the state, and all report that their employees cannot afford their basic needs and monthly bills. There are sexual assault advocates who qualify for safety net programs like SNAP and MaineCare because they are the head of the household for their families.

Unfortunately, none of the Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers can offer all staff a livable wage for a two-parent, two-child household. These professionals who give so much of their skills, talents and compassion are in their own crises daily despite working hard and long hours. Sexual Assault Advocates' pay starts as low as \$33,500. These are professionals who have intense and complex positions where they are on call and awakened by crisis calls overnight and on the weekends. It is important for you to know that advocates are hanging on right now because this legislation is before you, and should these increases not be funded, it is clear to me that we will lose a significant portion of this workforce.

This bill provides the mechanism to save the Sexual Assault Support Centers, including the Children's Advocacy Centers, in Maine from complete collapse. It is a critical moment where we cannot question if we can increase the salaries for the Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers. Instead, we must stand collectively and fund these meager salaries in our state.

I know that you have many compelling situations before you, but I want to emphasize and raise that sexual assault services are among the most critical that you will consider in this session.

Thank you for listening and being attentive to the needs of the Sexual Assault Support Centers and Children's Advocacy Centers and the services that are provided across each of our towns and cities in Maine.