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THE MAINE SENATE
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***Testimony of Senate Assistant Majority Leader Jill C. Duson on
LD 117, An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
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Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Jill Duson, I am the Senate Assistant Majority Leader, proudly serving Senate District 27, which is part of Portland and Westbrook. I am here today to introduce LD 117, "An Act to Provide Funding for Sexual Assault Services", and to speak to the work we left undone last legislative session.

Every year, 19,000 Mainers experience sexual violence.

Maine's sexual assault victim advocates are the backbone of our state's response to sexual violence. They work with **and** within every system that serves survivors and work to prevent sexual violence, from courts and police stations to schools and community organizations. Sexual assault advocates support survivors of all kinds of sexual violence, including victims of assault, human trafficking and exploitation, child survivors of sexual abuse, those who have experienced harassment at work or school, and military survivors of sexual assault. They also provide critical prevention efforts across our state, in schools, community organizations, and anywhere their support is needed.

Advocates' work, including the Executive Directors of these agencies, has them on-call nights and weekends, above and beyond their regular 40-hour work weeks. Sexual assault advocates regularly respond to calls in the middle of the night to meet survivors bedside in Emergency Departments. They hold survivors' hands in courtrooms and in support groups in prisons. They hold the stories of someone who has just experienced an assault as well as those whose trauma is decades old. **Their work and dedication to justice is nothing short of heroic, lifesaving, and world changing for those that rely on it and for the safety and health of our communities.**

Despite the critical need for advocacy services and the incredible impact they have, in the last few years turnover in the field has skyrocketed. Dedicated and highly trained advocates are leaving this work in droves, not because of the stress and trauma of their day to day work, though that is significant, but because of pay. In fact, when surveyed, advocates indicated pay was the primary reason they were leaving - with some working second jobs in order to stay in the field.

Last session, my colleague Representative Carlow and I sponsored a similar bill to this one – which increases wages for sexual assault support center advocates from a low of \$37,000 to \$45,000 and supports specialized services for survivors who experience sexual violence at higher rate than other - like individuals with developmental disabilities. This committee unanimously supported that bill in 2023, which was then funded by the Appropriations Committee with strong bipartisan support. But, being one of the bills which was addressed post-adjournment, it never became law.

When we introduced that bill in 2023, turnover at sexual assault support centers dropped significantly. Advocates had reason for hope. Then in the six months after the bill died, nearly 60% of staff left the field, taking their dedication and experience with them. This happened in a year with a 9% increase in demand for these services. Many of those advocates want to come back to this work – they love this work and know how important it is to people who have been sexually assaulted - but without higher wages, they simply can't afford to.

Over the last half century, sexual assault support centers have built an incredible network of supports for all victims and survivors of sexual violence. They have expanded offerings so that services are available in more places, at any time and on any day, and created a network of Children's Advocacy Centers to focus on the specific needs of child survivors. They have cultivated relationships across systems to improve the response to survivors – making every system they work with more trauma-informed and more centered on survivors' needs. And they have continually worked to make their services better and more impactful – through hours of continuing education and training while collaboratively raising standards across their field. Improving all those systems means that today, survivors have more choices and more control than ever before – even though much work is yet to be done. Without strong advocacy organizations with experienced and qualified staff, I fear what might happen to what has been built over these last decades and what that would mean for the pursuit of justice in these terrible cases.

There are dozens of advocates and systems partners who could speak more eloquently than me to how valuable their work is, how much in demand it has become, and how desperately they need to be adequately compensated for it – you can read that in the near 100 pieces of testimony submitted online ahead of this hearing, from:

- Survivors who have gone on to be able to live, work, and thrive because of advocates' supports,
- Advocates who are in desperate need of wages that will allow them to stay in the work they love,
- Law enforcement officers whose investigations are better and more trauma-informed because advocates are there,
- A domestic violence advocate who knows that collaboration between sexual violence and domestic violence agencies means that every survivor of violence has options and services available,
- Nurses who depend on advocates to support survivors during forensic exams,
- A program director at a jail who has seen lowered rates of reoffending by inmates with connections to sexual violence advocacy services,
- District attorneys whose successful cases hinge on advocates' support for their plaintiffs,

- The Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition who know that people who commit harm, have often also been harmed,
- The AARP who recognizes that Mainers of all ages need sexual assault advocacy to be sustainably funded, and
- The former director of the Baxter School Compensation fund, who saw firsthand the need for and impact of dedicated sexual violence advocates with the sensitivity and training to work with survivors whose abuse was both institutional and hidden for years.

You also can see this coalition here in this room and lining the halls outside – proving this issue is important to folks statewide – including in each one of your districts. Knowing how in demand and valuable your time is, we have invited just a few people to speak to you today about why passing and funding LD 117 is so important.

Standing here before you today, as a survivor myself, I know how important these services are to those that need them. I implore you to pass it - and to prioritize it within your communications with the Appropriations Committee - to both protect access to this critical care and to protect access to the first step to justice and healing.

Thank you for your time today and I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have for me.

LD 117 Testimony Excerpts

Advocates have to bear witness so we can support survivors. That is our job and some days, many days, that job is hard. A price could never be put on this type of work, but a livable wage would be a great start.

Advocate

The staff at the CAC are experts in their roles. If we didn't have the CAC to assist with these complicated, time-consuming cases, my job would be so much more difficult.

Law Enforcement Officer

Advocate

I hear clients say, time and time again, "I never would have made it through this without you," whether in a hospital room, in a courtroom, or at the end of a support group.

I don't know what I would have done without the advocates that continued to meet with me and support me through all of this..I don't know how I would be not only surviving, but thriving today

Survivor

I was forced to make a choice: stay in a job I loved or leave for something that allowed me to support myself. When I left the CAC, it wasn't because the work was too hard — it was because the pay was too low.

Former Advocate

Advocates are true heroes in every sense of the word. It is difficult to prove the impact of absence, but I would suggest that from a public health policy standpoint; the cost of not providing adequate support to those who have suffered would far exceed the amount requested in this bill.

Systems Partner

For the first time, I told someone my story. The advocate on the other end of the line met me with such compassion and validation... This was the moment my healing journey began.

Survivor

Because of advocates' work, survivors have a better understanding of what is going to happen next in their case and what might be expected of them. Providing that support, as well as the emotional support in the more difficult moments at court, allows us as prosecutors to focus on the case at hand....we see better and more enduring outcomes because of advocates' participation in the justice process.

Prosecutor

I have watched gifted, seasoned, passionate colleagues leave this work simply because they cannot make a livable wage.

Advocate

This work is both incredibly hard and extremely fulfilling. While I would love to do it forever, I am afraid I can't afford to.

Advocate

I have found that when I refer a resident to advocates, they have regular, usually weekly contact while the resident is in our facility, and then that advocate also follows the resident into the community for continued care. At the end of the day, for those residents who chose to work with advocates, this significantly reduces recidivism.

Social Worker in Maine's Jail System

The role of children's advocacy centers in the world of child abuse prosecution can't be overstated. CACs are critical to the integrity of the investigation, the strength of the state's presentation and the reduction of additional trauma to child victims.

Prosecutor

Domestic abuse and sexual assault often occur in tandem, and having knowledgeable and empathetic advocates available for survivors of both can make a world of difference!

Domestic Violence Advocate

Police agencies are using advocates and their organizations' services at a very high rate. The services are valuable for survivors to obtain the support, guidance, and resources they need to be successful in recovery

Law Enforcement Officer

Any successes I've had as a prosecutor handling these cases would not have been possible if it weren't for the advocates working tirelessly to support victims through the unimaginably daunting criminal justice process. I have also heard from many survivors over the years that the support they received from advocates helped give them the strength they needed to testify and confront their abusers in a room full of strangers.

Prosecutor