

Good morning Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Labor Committee, thank you so much for taking time to think through this issue. My name is Oronde Cruger and I'm the Executive Director for Speak About It, a nonprofit that offers consent education and sexual assault prevention programming across communities spanning schools, sports teams, retirement homes and more. Additionally, I spent over a decade in the service industry in Brunswick and Portland working as a bartender, server, and front door bouncer. This combination of experiences led me to co-found Heart of Hospitality, a collaboration between service industry workers and local violence prevention professionals to offer vital safety training to restaurants and hospitality businesses across Maine.

I want to give 3 quick thoughts in support of LD1554.

1. I'll start with the hard facts. Studies suggest that **approximately 82% of women and about 42% of men experience sexual harassment or assault in their life with about ¾ of those taking place in public spaces for women and about ¼ taking place in public spaces for men**¹. The US Equal Opportunity Commission estimates that between 25% and 85% of women report their sexual harassment happening in a workplace² and we know that experiencing sexual harassment and assault can lead to depression, anxiety, and impaired success at work³. Maine became Vacationland by being a beautiful location where folks feel safe and comfortable. In a state that so deeply benefits from tourism, it is crucial that visitors feel safe to want to spend time here and that our workers feel safe to be able to do their work unimpaired.
2. Maine is a state where community is crucial. Bars and restaurants often become an extension of one's own living room, especially in small towns. People *want* to make sure their favorite places are safe, and I believe that training servers and staff in sexual assault prevention help keeps both patrons and staff safe. At both Speak About It and Heart of Hospitality, our participants often express that they want to learn how to do things right, but that culture and norms are changing, and they are not always sure why or what that means for them. Some of the most frequently asked questions in our trainings are "why isn't it ok when I do ___?". **Folks have good intentions but are fighting off a lifetime of silence and confusing social and cultural messages around what is or isn't sexual harassment.** The number of times that servers have brought up situations where a patron or a co-worker thought they were making a joke but really were making them feel unsafe or uncomfortable is staggering. Providing a space for people to ask their questions so they can learn what is and isn't acceptable and ways to intervene is key.
3. Mainers want this. Prior to the pandemic so many venues throughout Maine were demanding our trainings, we could barely keep up. As venues started to open up in 2021, we immediately started getting emails asking if we were beginning again. **LD 1554 leverages the energy hospitality businesses already have for this type of program, and ensures they make it a priority.** Venues sometimes find it hard to fit in these trainings in between hectic schedules and seasonal shifts, so LD 1554 helps restaurants prioritize these trainings. I firmly believe that people want to do the right thing but extenuating circumstances can get in the way. LD 1554 helps to implement a framework that will encourage venues to prioritize the work that will help to keep our communities safer. This bill will ensure better working conditions for staff and better experiences for guests, enriching the tourism and hospitality industries that are so critical to the economic success of many of our communities. Thank you!

¹ Raj A, Rao N, Patel P, Kearn H, Skolnick C. #MeToo 2024: A National Study of Sexual Harassment and Assault in the United States. Newcomb Institute. Tulane University. September 2024. <https://newcomb.tulane.edu/content/metoo-research>.

² Feldblum, Chai R & Lipnic, V. A. Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace#_Toc453686298

³ Flores, M. W., Sharp, A., Carson, N. J., & Cook, B. L. (2023). Estimates of major depressive disorder and treatment among adolescents by race and ethnicity. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 177(11), 1215–1223. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.3996