



The Maine Coalition  
to End Domestic Violence

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Testimony of Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director, Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence  
In Support of LD 1139, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary  
April 17, 2025

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence. I am here today to ask for your continued support for state funds to address the continued shortfall in victim services funding as a result of the problems with the federal Victims of Crime Act funding. We are so appreciative that, with your leadership, the Maine Legislature addressed this funding shortfall in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Session of the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature, but as you know, the crisis has not resolved, and it will not resolve for a few more years.

Though many members of this Committee are well versed in what the Victims of Crime Act is and how it supports foundational victim services across Maine, I have detailed information to those points in my testimony below.

VOCA funds support both high quality, reliable, statewide advocacy for crime victims directly and the development of close collaborative efforts to improve the response of law enforcement and attention to victims' rights in the criminal legal system. Filling the VOCA shortfall is essential to ensuring that the service providers it funds can remain flat funded in FY25-26. Otherwise, services will be sharply reduced. To be clear, with rising costs in the face of needs in our community that have not abated, flat funding already means some cuts to services. That is why many of the providers here today also have other funding efforts pending before the legislature to try and address that reality. But for all of us, VOCA is the foundation. Addressing the VOCA shortfall keeps our basic funding whole.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear: addressing the VOCA shortfall keeps us whole only assuming there are no losses in other federal funds. Currently, the funding portal for the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, which represents several million dollars of annual funding to Maine's victim services providers, particularly those providing domestic violence and sexual assault services, is closed. It has been closed since early February, and we have received no information on when it will be reopened for funding applications. More than \$4M of victim services to funds through OVW need to be renewed by October 1<sup>st</sup> in order for Maine's providers to not suffer devastating cuts to services from this other area. In prior years, these applications would have been submitted in late February through March, as there are always significant processing delays. That issue is entirely separate from the VOCA funding shortfall. **But what is currently happening to other federal funds does mean that the impact on Maine's victim services providers will be that much more severe if the Maine Legislature fails to address the full VOCA shortfall for the next two budget years and to address it in the biennial budget.**

Today, when the police respond to a domestic violence call, they provide contact information to the local Domestic Violence Resource Center to be able to initiate a call to that crime victim to offer support and explore what they may need for immediate safety and to help link that victim with other VOCA funded support, like legal services and prosecution-based victim witness advocates. None of us work in isolation. We are a network serving Maine's families in crisis and beyond.

VOCA funds impact every step of a domestic violence survivor and their children from being trapped and afraid to living abuse free in safe and stable homes. In 2024, Maine's Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers served nearly 15,000 people, of whom 8,572 accessed services through the 24-hour helpline. Advocates supported 5,980 people with court advocacy across Maine's 26 District Courts, and 1,016 people with shelter and/or long-term housing assistance, including 490 children. At least half of the people we serve have at least one child. All of this work depends on VOCA funds, and the state funds allocated to fill the gap.

We are grateful for the \$3 million in ongoing funding included in the governor's proposed budget to partially fill the funding gap created by a substantial reduction in Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding from the federal government. Unfortunately, \$3 million will cover only half of the funding gap, and so this bill is essential to continuing the critical state funding allocated on a one-time basis in the last session that filled the funding gap for the current fiscal year. There is no indication from the federal level that the Victims of Crime Fund will be restored for at least several more years.

A few words from a survivor regarding her experience of accessing VOCA funded services:

From the moment the Domestic Violence Resource Center opened the door to me – the first helpline call, there was help for whatever challenge I ran into, and if they couldn't help, they found me the resources. They helped me to obtain a Protection from Abuse Order against my abuser and later helped me with my divorce. They provided support and safety planning when my protection order was due to expire and helped me to obtain an extension for another 2 years. Because of the services and support that they provided, I have been able to rebuild my life and keep my son safe. They have been steadfast in their support over the past 16+ years. This took on many forms, such as helping me navigate multiple modifications of the custody agreement for my son, finding a safe place for custody exchanges, and helping me make a mandated report because of what my abuser had done. They were with me every step of the way. Because of their support, my son can be himself entirely, without fear of harm from someone that is supposed to have his trust; and I can sleep knowing that we are safe.

Attached here is a document that contains the words from survivors of domestic abuse and violence who have been helped by our services. They provided testimony to you last session in support of this need, and they gave us permission to use their words to support the continued need for funding. We know our services are life-saving, and we need your support to sustain them. Please support LD 1139 and advocate for the full \$6 million VOCA shortfall to be addressed as part of the biennial budget.



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#### What is VOCA?

Enacted in 1984, the Victims of Crime Act, which is typically referred to as VOCA, is the central source of federal financial support for direct services to victims of crime, and the largest single source of victim services specific funding in Maine. It is administered at the federal level through the US Dept. of Justice Office for Victims of Crime. Each state and territory receive a grant annually to distribute to the organizations that provide direct services to victims of crime. The amount each state or territory receives is determined through a formula, not a competitive process. There are also VOCA grants that go directly to Tribal victim service providers.

The funding for VOCA does not come from tax dollars. It is a special fund into which fines, penalty assessments, bond forfeitures collected from convicted federal offenders, and certain other collections are deposited. Each state determines what entity is responsible for administering these funds in compliance with the federal rules and regulations, including the sub-granting process. The State Adminstrating Agency for Maine is the Department of Health and Human Services, with the staff responsible for this work located in the Office of Violence Intervention & Response Programs that is within the Office of Child and Family Services.

#### Second: What can and does VOCA fund in Maine?

From the initial grant in 1985 through 2014, the VOCA fund at the federal level was stable and growing, with funds going in and out as intended. The annual grants fluctuated a bit, but the amount Maine received remained about the same year to year, with occasional increases bringing the state award to around \$2 million from the late 1990s until 2014. During that time, Maine's VOCA funds were granted to the Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers, Sexual Assault Centers, and District Attorney's Offices to support Victim Witness Advocates.

As the amount of money accumulating in the VOCA fund grew, the federal administrators in 2015 decided to increase the amount of funds being distributed, resulting in a significant increase to state grants nationwide. For Maine, the grant increased in 2015 to nearly \$8.5 million and reached a high of \$9.5 million in the 2016 grant award.

Note: The state has 4 years to fully expend each grant award, which allows the state administrator to manage the amount being allocated to subgrantees year to year, maintaining a consistent rather than fluctuating grant award.

This increase in VOCA dollars allowed Maine to modestly increase support for existing services and to expand support for crime victims almost a decade ago, including:

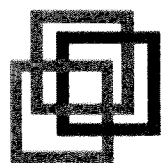
1. programs serving underserved populations particularly older adults and New Mainers,
2. civil legal representation,

3. Children's Advocacy Centers,
4. Coordination and support in the Attorney General's Office for the county-based Victim Witness Advocates,
5. the Court Appointed Special Advocate program in the Judicial Branch,
6. Victim Services in the Dept. of Corrections,
7. and increased funds for domestic violence shelter staffing, better meeting the complex needs of shelter residents with substance use disorders and their children, and establishing an emergency shelter for victims of sex trafficking.

During this time, under the administration of Governor LePage, DHHS went through a process of re-evaluating the allocation of various federal block grants and state general funds, pivoting to reliance on VOCA funds for victim services, significantly decreasing the utilization of social services block grants and state funds to support existing victim services. This meant that, despite the large increase in the VOCA allocation to Maine, existing victim services providers receiving VOCA funds did not realize a significant increase in overall funding.

Third: What is the problem we are facing with VOCA?

Beginning in 2016, there were shenanigans at the federal level that negatively affected the VOCA fund. First, to balance the federal budget, congress took several hundred million dollars out of the Victims of Crime Fund to pay for some of the Violence Against Women Act Program costs, which depleted the fund dramatically. Second, deposits to the Victims of Crime Fund decreased substantially due to changes in federal prosecuting practices. There have been steps taken at the federal level to fix the problem, but those efforts will take time to replenish the funds, and for at least several more years, grants to states will be affected, with grants to Maine anticipated to be even less than FY2024's \$3.4 million.



# MCEDV.

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## Maine Survivors On VOCA-Funded D.V. Programs

Excerpts from testimony provided to the Maine State Legislature<sup>1</sup>

From Christie:

I have just barely survived a grueling separation and divorce from the father of my children. I am only around and alive and thriving to be here for my children because of Next Step<sup>2</sup>.

Victims of Crime are all around you. Most of the people who interacted with me for the three years it took me to legally separate myself from the destruction of a cruel and vindictive man did not know what I was going through. I was ashamed that I fell prey to a perpetrator. I wanted to hide and be silent. I wanted to deny and pretend it was not happening to me.

I will always  
think of Next  
Step as the  
Life Raft that  
rescued me  
from sinking.  
-Christie

I had a therapist that pointed me in the direction of Next Step. I immediately joined a weekly virtual support group. Being with a specialized group facilitator with curriculum geared toward our situation was the leverage for me to get my life back ~~forme~~ and my children.

I will always think of Next Step as the Life Raft that rescued me from sinking... I literally walked around in the court room of my divorce trial in shoes that were disintegrating. I could barely stand, literally and figuratively. I had a Court Advocate from Next Step witnessing the trial. She gave me the support to tell my truth. Incidentally she also gave me her shoes to wear to finish the trial. Next Step is that foundational.

... Victims need more than courts can provide. They need support and strength, and resources that can help them summon enough courage to just take that Next Step, whatever it is. Cutting the budget of VOCA that supports Victims of Crime says Victims don't matter. They do matter. They deserve the right to have support to become whole again.

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

<sup>2</sup> Next Step is a member of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, serving Hancock and Washington Counties.

From Amy:

For a long time, six years to be exact, I lived with abuse by a man who was supposed to love me as my husband. Divorce didn't stop it. I was given the short end of the stick at every turn I reached out for help. I felt like I was broken and fighting a system not built for my situation. Alone in a state with family too far in distance to help me and living with fear and isolation, I had to rely on the services available to find a way out.

Even with procuring a lawyer, my struggle with needing help to leave... took me three years, tons of court dates, protection from abuse orders, and every ounce of personal strength. I struggled to find the dedication and time to even begin to put my life back together.

It's hard enough to have the strength to say I need help. I can't imagine how things would be if that help was not available. -Amy

I one hundred percent believe Safe Voices<sup>3</sup> helped me feel safe enough to have a voice. Taking funds away from Safe Voices feels like my voice is being silenced once again. Finally, I was given someone to actually hear me and understand my struggles. Someone to have the compassion and the tools and connections to keep me on my feet.

They were the only option I had to make my transition out of my abusive situation achievable, reliable, and safe. As I see it, they are experts in their field. And I know for a fact that without them, my chances of my mental, physical, and emotional recovery would not have been the same.

So this is me sharing how important it is to keep services and programs and help going. Funding keeps people safe, but not just safe, it keeps people able to achieve workable, manageable, restructured lives. I know for myself, the thought of not having programs that have provided so much for me is heartbreaking. It's hard enough to have the strength to say I need help. I can't imagine how things would be if that help was not available.

... Safe Voices truly gives a voice to the voiceless and the possibility for success and healing to the broken. I still attend support groups, attend classes, and use the hotline. That support and help is the hand I need to keep the life I fought so hard to put back together.

... They are depended on so much by so many women I have met, for things as small as giving personal care items to regain self-care or clothes for the job you were hoping to get, to as big as providing a place that's safe to keep a roof over our and our children's heads, so we can stay safe off the streets and from more harm from others. They create a way to get out, get away and get aware. Safe Voices needs funding to give us those tools and resources.

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<sup>3</sup> Safe Voices is a member of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, serving Franklin, Oxford and Androscoggin Counties.

From Maggie:

I am a survivor of domestic violence. On March 27<sup>th</sup> 2008, I left my abuser of 7 years after he assaulted me in front of my son. My sister drove me from the police department to my local Domestic Violence Resource Center, and from there my life changed. I didn't know the challenges I would be facing, and looking back, I know that without the help of the wonderful people at that agency, I would not be where I am today. I was 23 years old, had a very young child, and had been living with abuse since I was 16. I had been isolated from family and friends, with no phone or car, and until a few months before I had been living in a home where my abuser would sporadically turn off the electricity to "punish" me. I had been living at the mercy of a man who killed my dog because I loved her too much and made windchimes out of her bones. I couldn't see any way out. I was terrified and I felt like my son and I had no way to get free and nothing would ever change.

But thanks to the dedication and willingness of everyone at that DVRC, I didn't end up back where I started. From the moment they opened the door to me, there was help for whatever challenge I ran into, and if they couldn't help, they found me the resources.

They helped me to obtain a protection from abuse order against my abuser, and later helped me with my divorce. They provided support and safety planning when my protection order was due to expire and helped me to obtain an extension for another 2 years. Because of the services and support that they provided, I have been able to rebuild my life and keep my son safe. They have been steadfast in their support over the past 16+ years. This took on many forms, such as helping me navigate multiple modifications of the custody agreement for my son, finding a safe place for custody exchanges and helping me to make a mandated report because of what my abuser had done. They were with me every step of the way. Because of their support, my son can be himself entirely, without fear of harm from someone that is supposed to have his trust, and I can sleep knowing that we are safe.

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-Maggie

Access to domestic violence services and court-based advocates<sup>4</sup> helps survivors navigate the complex process of the civil and criminal justice system, without which they're lost in the metaphorical woods. Some of these survivors may be waiting years for their abuser to face consequences and that means they are left hanging in the balance without any certainty of what is going to happen.... I cannot imagine how impossible the process would be without the support of Victim Witness Advocates and DV Advocates.



<sup>4</sup> "Court-based advocates" are those advocates working within the district attorneys' offices. Also often referred to as Victim Witness Advocates. In Maine, these advocates are also funded by VOCA.

From Elizabeth:

Funding for programs and services for survivors of domestic abuse is essential. I don't know how I would have been able to handle any of what I had to go through on my own. - Elizabeth

No one ever expects to have to lock themselves in their bathroom and call 911 because their fiancé has just assaulted them, but that is where I found myself one night in early 2020.

Waiting for the police to arrive, then hearing the click of the handcuffs on his wrists meant I was safe for the night, but what about tomorrow and next week, or next month? Would I have to move me and my children out of the house immediately? Would he be coming home? What could I do to gain control over the situation and make a plan for my future without him in it?

I called Caring Unlimited<sup>5</sup> the next morning and I was met that afternoon at the York County Courthouse by a Court Advocate who sat down with me and walked me through the process of filing a Protection From Abuse order. Soon after I was able to speak with their attorney who represented me in and out of court so I didn't have to face my abuser.

I was kept in the loop every step of the way and treated with kindness and respect. I am one of the lucky ones who was able to leave their abuser, but I know there are many more women like me who will continue to need help just like I did. Funding for programs and services for survivors of domestic abuse is essential. I don't know how I would have been able to handle any of what I had to go through on my own.



Knowing other survivors and talking with other resilient people has given me strength, confidence and empowered me to take chances and move forward. I feel lucky for the services that I continue to receive from Partners for Peace. If not for their assistance, I would have been homeless while pregnant or returned to my abuser because I did not have a safe place to be. Partners For Peace and the resources they provide saved my life. -T.

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<sup>5</sup> Caring Unlimited is a member of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, serving York County.



From Sokunthim<sup>6</sup>:

I have been receiving services from Through These Doors<sup>7</sup> for several years while navigating the family law legal system. I did go through a lot of hardship, and I felt like I received a lot of justice when I started working with Through These Doors. I feel incredibly grateful to have met Through These Doors; as a woman and a minority I received so much help. I would like to please kindly request for the government to support families like mine. I think that families like mine would experience tremendous hardship and challenge without these services. I beg the government to continue their support of these services, especially for Asian women who had not been so educated like myself, we really need that support. Please help us.

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-Sokumthim



As a result of my situation, I have had heavy involvement in the court system, attending numerous court dates with more to come. I am a witness in numerous court cases. Every step of the way I have had support, whether through the 24/7 crisis line, meetings with my advocate, weekly support groups, or the physical presence of an advocate with me at every court appearance.  
-T.

I hope there are  
continuous sufficient  
funds to help the victims  
and survivors until we  
can end all domestic  
violence. Otherwise, life  
could be extremely  
difficult with unbearable  
suffering.  
-Anonymous

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<sup>6</sup> Statement provided through an interpreter.

<sup>7</sup> Through These Doors is a member of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, serving Cumberland County.

From G.:

In 2021, after years of abuse at the hands of my ex-husband, he stole my money, vandalized, and destroyed my home, left me physically broken in chronic pain, and homeless, while caring for our 4-year-old son and facing winter in my car. After receiving several death threats from my ex, I worked with a legal advocate from Partners for Peace for assistance with filing a protection order that was granted to help keep myself and my son safe.

For almost two years now, I have been attending their weekly support group which has been critical in my healing process. After being ripped away from my family and friends, isolated and tucked back into the woods, I finally had people who I could connect with. To hear their stories, and to know that I wasn't the only one to go through this, gave me better perspective of this journey.

The Partners for Peace advocate/facilitator of these meetings connected me with other people in the organization, who were able to help us live in their transitional housing program at no cost until I was able to afford it. Finally, we were safe. We were warm. We could breathe.

Without Partners for Peace and all the assistance/support that they have provided, I truly believe that my son and I would've died in the woods of Dexter, Maine. I owe them our lives. The idea that a funding cut would reduce their ability to help others in similar situations terrifies me. I am just one of nearly 2000 people they helped in 2022. I still utilize their services today. Without the ongoing utilization, my mental state through this transition would have suffered greatly and affected my son potentially worse-so. Imagine what the lives of those helped would look like had Partners for Peace not been able to assist them... not because of a lack of desire, effort, and most importantly, NEED, but because they simply didn't have the budget? How much are those lives worth to you?

Without Partners for Peace and all the assistance/support that they have provided, I truly believe that my son and I would've died in the woods... Imagine what the lives of those helped would look like had Partners for Peace not been able to assist them... not because of a lack of desire, effort, and most importantly, NEED, but because they simply didn't have the budget? – G.



Without the funding, many survivors of DV may become victims of a long-term violence. -G.

From F.:

I still attend the weekly support meetings to support the other people, to show them that I have been there, that I understand what they are going through, and that there is hope. -F.

I have been working with Partners for Peace<sup>8</sup> for years. It all began when my 10-year-old daughter and I left my abusive husband and her dad. When we left, we had no place to turn, so we called the helpline, and we were able to stay at the Partners for Peace shelter. Being able to stay close to our former home allowed my daughter to continue to stay enrolled in her school and did not disrupt my employment. We stayed at the shelter, free of charge, while I waited to get approved for low-income housing. Staying at the shelter allowed me to get myself back on my feet and to be able to provide for my daughter. If we had not been able to stay at the shelter, we would have had to stay with my abusive husband or we might have been homeless, neither of which was a safe option for me and my daughter.

While staying at the shelter, I worked with a legal advocate, and they helped me to obtain a lawyer. The lawyer represented me with my Protection From Abuse Order and later she started the divorce proceedings, free of charge. This was a huge financial savings as we were taking the steps to live a life free of abuse.

I have attended the weekly support group meetings since I started staying at the shelter. I still attend the weekly support meetings to support the other people, to show them that I have been there, that I understand what they are going through, and that there is hope. I now have a career that supports us financially and my daughter and I now have a place to call home.



There were no services for my mom when she went through this in the 1970s. I believe their organization will help build a strong Maine people, and I ask you to make sure that Safe Voices and other victim services have the funding they need to do so. - Stephanie

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<sup>8</sup> Partners for Peace is a member of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, serving Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties.