

May 12, 2025

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Carlie Fischer, and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA), the organization that represents and serves Maine's sexual violence prevention and response programs as well as Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers. MECASA initiates and advocates for survivor-centered public policy; provides expert training, technical assistance, and resources for providers and partners; and funds the service providers in your communities.

MECASA is here today in support of LD 1871, An Act to Permit Sealing Criminal History Record Information of Victims of Sex Trafficking or Sexual Exploitation. Thank you to Senator Talbot Ross for sponsoring this legislation.

Affecting 300 to 400 Mainers every year¹, sex trafficking is one of the most deeply misunderstood and misrepresented forms of violence. Popular narratives of human trafficking involve someone being kidnapped, physically restrained, or locked in a room. These dynamics *can* be part of trafficking experiences, but both national and Maine data tell us that trafficking is typically more coercive than physically forceful. We see patterns of manipulation, extortion, threats of harm to a survivor or their loved ones, and control of basic needs to keep people compliant, and it's critically important to understand that coercion can limit choices just as much as physical restraint.

When one person chooses to exploit another, they rely on a range of coercive tactics to gain and maintain control. One of those tactics is involving survivors in criminalized behavior. As a result of traffickers withholding necessities, a survivor might act to meet immediate survival needs, like stealing food, driving without a license, or trespassing for

¹ Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc. (2015). *Maine human trafficking needs assessment*.

https://www.maine.state.nh.org/uploads/4/4/3/6/44365787/hza_me_htna_final_for_print_01062015.pdf

shelter. Other times, traffickers coerce people into illegal activity as a deliberate strategy—once the crime has been committed, they use that behavior to convince the survivor that they are now “too compromised” to seek help or report what’s happening. They say things like, “You’re a criminal now. You’ll be arrested. No one will believe you.”

As a result, many survivors of human trafficking carry criminal records that are a direct result of the abuse they endured, and those charges don’t go away when the exploitation ends. They follow the survivor long after they’ve exited the trafficking situation. They create barriers to employment, housing, education, and engaging in normal aspects of parenting, like volunteering at your child’s school. At MECASA, we hear stories every day of how these criminal records prevent people from rebuilding their lives. Even when they are working hard to do everything “right”, they are trapped in a cycle of stigma and instability.

Passing this bill would send a powerful message that Maine cares about the context in which behavior occurred, and that we are committed to response processes that evolve as our understanding does. Nuance matters for justice. We cannot claim to care about trafficking survivors while we continue to penalize them for doing what was necessary to survive abuse. We can and should do better by offering them a clean slate, and therefore, the opportunity to thrive with dignity.

I strongly urge you to support this legislation. Thank you for your time.

About Maine's Sexual Assault Service Providers

One in five Mainers will experience sexual assault at some point in their lifetime. Each year, 19,000 Mainers will experience sexual violence.²

Maine's sexual violence service providers provide free and confidential services across the state to victims/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault and those close to them, as well as to individuals who wish to increase their understanding of the issues. Just some of the services include a 24-hour statewide sexual assault helpline, crisis intervention and information, support groups, in-person accompaniment and advocacy through the medical and legal systems, and school- and community-based prevention education. Services are provided for a victim/survivor regardless of when they experienced sexual violence, and regardless of what type of sexual violence they experienced. Types of sexual violence include, but are not limited to, sexual harassment and gender-based bullying, child sexual abuse, elder sexual abuse, stalking, sex trafficking, and sexual violence within an intimate partner relationship.

24/7 Confidential

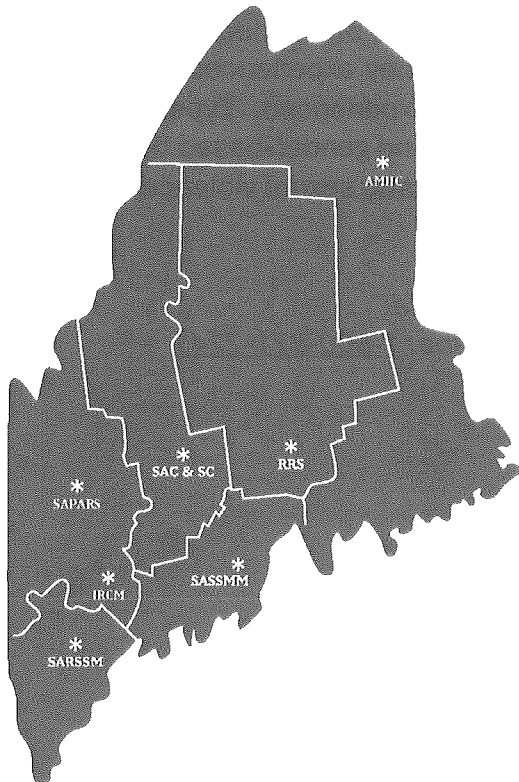
Maine Sexual Assault Helpline: 1-800-871-7741

² Murray, C., Dumont, R., & Shaler, G. (2022). *Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities*. Maine Statistical Analysis Center. University of Southern Maine.

mecasa

**MAINE COALITION AGAINST
SEXUAL ASSAULT**

info@mecasa.org | mecasa.org
207-626-0034



**STATEWIDE
SEXUAL ASSAULT HELPLINE
1-800-871-7741**

Free. Private. 24/7.

MAINE'S SEXUAL ASSAULT SUPPORT CENTERS

AMHC Sexual Assault Services (AMHC)

Serving Androscoggin, Hancock, & Washington Counties •
amhesas.org

Immigrant Resource Center of Maine

Serving Androscoggin & Cumberland Counties • ircofmaine.org

Rape Response Services (RRS)

Serving Penobscot & Piscataquis Counties • rrsonline.org

Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Services (SAPARS)

Serving Androscoggin, Oxford & Franklin Counties and the towns of
Bridgton & Harrison • sapars.org

Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center (SAC & SC)

Serving Kennebec & Somerset Counties • silentnomore.org

Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine (SARSSM)

Serving Cumberland & York Counties • sarssm.org

Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM)

Serving Eastern Cumberland, Sagadahoc, Knox, Waldo & Lincoln
Counties • sassmm.org

MORE SEXUAL VIOLENCE SERVICES

Maine TransNet • mainetrans.net • info@mainetransnet.org

Wabanaki Women's Coalition • wabanakiwomenscoalition.org
207-763-3478

Aroostook Band of Micmacs, Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center • 207-551-3639

Houlton Band of Maliseets, Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center • 207-532-6401

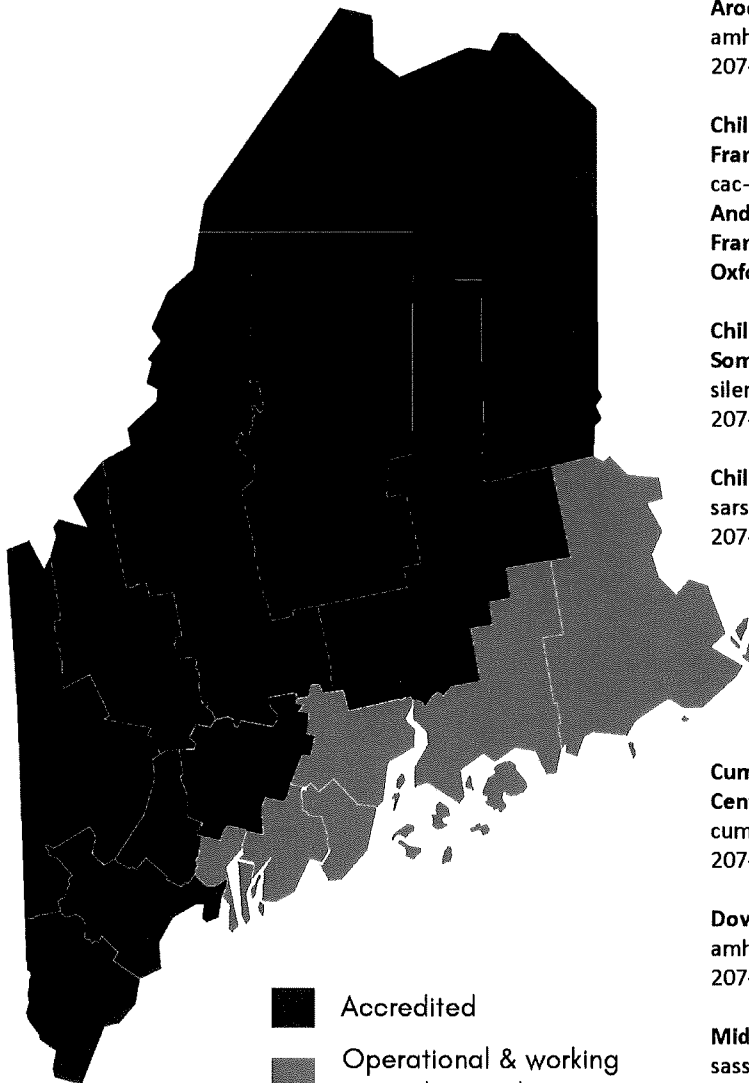
Indian Township Passamaquoddy, Domestic & Sexual
Violence Advocacy Center • 207-214-1917

Passamaquoddy Peaceful Relations • 1-877-853-2613

Penobscot Indian Nation, Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center • 207-631-4886



Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers



- Accredited
- Operational & working toward accreditation

Aroostook County Children's Advocacy Center
amhcsas.org
207-472-6134

Children's Advocacy Center of Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties
cac-afo.org
Androscoggin: 207-784-0436
Franklin: 207-778-9777
Oxford: 207-739-1228

Children's Advocacy Center of Kennebec & Somerset Counties
silentnomore.org/about-our-cac
207-861-4491

Children's Advocacy Center of York County
sarsmm.org
207-459-2380

Cumberland County Children's Advocacy Center
cumberlandcountycac.org
207-879-6160

Downeast Children's Advocacy Center
amhcsas.org
207-255-3687

Midcoast Children's Advocacy Center
sassmm.org
207-522-7162

Penquis Children's Advocacy Center
penquiscac.org
207-974-2469