

Testimony in Support of LD 1871
Presented by Kara Barnies
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Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary,

My name is Kara Barnies, and I live in Lewiston, Maine. I am here today to testify in strong support of LD 1871, *An Act to Permit Sealing Criminal History Record Information of Victims of Sex Trafficking or Sexual Exploitation*.

I serve as the Legal Advocacy Program Manager at Safe Voices, the domestic violence and sex trafficking resource center for Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties. Seven years ago, I began my journey at Safe Voices just as we were opening a confidential shelter specifically for survivors fleeing sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Since then, I have welcomed many women into our safe house—women who arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs, seeking safety, stability, and a fresh start.

Too often, people ask, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” when speaking about victims. What they don’t see is that traffickers intentionally create systems of dependency on them for food, shelter, money, companionship, substances, and even love. Survivors are often made to believe they have no other options. As an advocate, my job is to build trust and connect survivors to resources that meet their needs safely. Over time, this helps restore their autonomy and reduces their vulnerability to further exploitation.

LD 1871 is a vital step in helping survivors move beyond simply surviving their trauma to actually rebuilding and thriving. The truth is, many survivors are coerced or forced into criminalized behavior as a direct result of their exploitation. Traffickers use manipulation and fear to compel victims to do things like sell drugs or commit theft, crimes for which the survivor is charged, while the trafficker faces zero consequences. These criminal records then follow survivors for years, standing in the way of employment, housing, and healing, even after they’ve broken free.

I’ve had the privilege of walking alongside many survivors in their recovery journeys, through the darkest moments and into the light. I’ve celebrated GEDs earned, dreams of giving back, college graduations, sobriety milestones, and the births of beautiful children. These survivors have worked tirelessly to create lives they are proud of. Yet, despite their progress, they continue to be held back by past convictions tied directly to their exploitation.

How can we expect survivors to rebuild their lives if, despite their courage and effort, they are repeatedly denied safe housing or meaningful employment because of a background check? In today’s housing crisis, these barriers are even more pronounced. And when survivors can’t access the basic building blocks of a stable life, they remain vulnerable to further exploitation.

These individuals are resilient, capable, and have so much to offer. Their lived experience, combined with their education and healing, uniquely positions them to be the caretakers, educators, leaders, and advocates our communities so desperately need.

It is heartbreaking to hear a survivor say that her dream is to use her experience to help youth at risk of exploitation, but that she can't get hired because of her record. LD 1871 provides a path forward. It acknowledges that survivors should not be punished for the abuse they endured and gives them a fair chance at the futures they deserve.

Thank you for your time and for considering this critical legislation.