



Jill C. Duson
Senator, District 27
Assistant Majority Leader

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony of Senate Assistant Majority Leader Jill C. Duson on

LD 2212, An Act Making Unified Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

February 18, 2026

Good afternoon, Senators Ingwersen and Rotundo, Representatives Gattine and Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services. My name is Jill Duson. I proudly serve Senate District 27, which is part of Portland and part of Westbrook, and have the honor of serving as the Senate Assistant Majority Leader. 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 and children's advocacy center staff are the backbone of our state's response to sexual violence. They work with 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 members who have experienced 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.



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Despite the critical need for advocacy services and the incredible impact they have, in the last five years turnover in the field skyrocketed. Dedicated and highly trained advocates were leaving the 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, more than 100 people provided testimony before the Health and Human Services Committee in support of LD 117: survivors, nurses, civil legal attorneys, corrections staff, civil legal attorneys, district attorneys, prisons' advocates, law enforcement, and more. And, I remember the moving stories committee members shared about the ways sexual violence had impacted their own families. LD 117 proposed \$1.83 M/year to raise advocate salaries from lows in the \$30,000/year to a floor of \$45,000. And your committee voted unanimously to make that happen. Thank you!

Ultimately, the bill landed on the table. In the final days of the session, the bill was used to amend another initiative in the budget – sadly the result was only partial, one-time funding. But the impact was huge. Once the money was secured, staff turnover screeched to a halt – going from a high of 60% (after we did not fund this bill two sessions ago) to under 20% across the state, and under 10% in some agencies. This funding stabilized this critical workforce.

But the funding was one-time. Advocates from Aroostook to York Counties are waiting and watching. If we are unwilling to move this initiative into the baseline budget now, advocates will begin looking for other employment as soon as this session closes.

I implore you, on behalf of the 19,000 Mainers who experience sexual violence every year and the skilled and compassionate advocates who want to continue to be there to support them: move this initiative into the baseline budget.

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 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.

Sustaining Wages for Sexual Assault Advocates

The History

Each year, **19,000** Mainers experience sexual violence.

Advocates are available **24/7**, supporting survivors in crisis & on their path to healing.

For years, Maine's sexual assault services have faced significant staff turnover.

The number one reason cited by sexual assault advocates is not the nature of the work, but **low wages**.

In the 132nd First Session, Senator Duson's LD 117 raised advocate salaries statewide from a low of \$32,000 to a floor of \$45,000! But this was **ONE-TIME** funding, which will expire next year.

The Impact

In October, this funding was distributed to sexual assault support centers statewide.

Advocates reported feeling more supported and valued.

Funding Distributed to Date by County:

Aroostook, Hancock, Washington Counties	\$128,009
Penobscot & Piscataquis Counties	\$194,401
Kennebec & Somerset Counties	\$85,088
Androscoggin, Oxford, & Franklin Counties	\$82,430
Waldo, Knox, Lincoln, & Sagadahoc Counties	\$125,727
Cumberland & York Counties	\$84,344

Turnover dropped dramatically - from a high of 60% to, at one center, a low of 15%!