



Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services

PO Box 6, Auburn, ME 04212 | 207-784-5272 | sapars.org

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 Meg Hatch and I am the Executive Director at Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services, the sexual assault support center that serves Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties. We are also the umbrella organization for the Children's Advocacy Center that serves the same area. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am here to testify in support of Section 000 of LD 2212 and to urge that you amend this section of the budget to include ongoing funding for the Victims of Crime backfill as well as for the increased sexual assault advocate salaries it also ultimately supported.

Advocates ensure that survivors can make well informed decisions about complicated circumstances. We are available 24/7/365 to help survivors navigate options. What happens when a survivor goes to the hospital for a kit? Will the survivor need a protection order? Will they decide to report to law enforcement? Do they need to access Crime Victim's Compensation? What else do they need in order to begin their path toward healing? Advocates help with all of this and should be appropriately compensated for their time.

Maine made a two-year commitment to raise advocates salaries from the low \$30,000 range to a baseline of \$45,000. This increase matters. Prior to the increase, sexual assault advocates reported the number one reason for leaving the field was because it was unaffordable to do the work that they cared about deeply. In the event that this funding is discontinued we will have a catastrophic exodus of advocates across the state and survivors of sexual assault will not receive the care and support that they deserve.

This appreciation from a staff member sums up the difference the wage increase has made in their life:
"I am an educator/advocate at a sexual assault center here in Maine. I have been with the organization for nearly 15 years collectively. In 2016 I left the agency to pursue other work that had a salary that could support my basic living needs. This was not a decision I took lightly, because I love the work that I do as an advocate/educator, and feel passionately about violence prevention work. I was fortunate enough to support and educate students through their entire school careers, kindergarten-12th grade and see the lessons play out over time to create safer communities, and it pained me to leave over a salary that couldn't support my basic living needs. In late 2019 I came back to the agency and work that I love, with the financial support of my partner, but still under a strict budget. This recent wage increase has taken some of the financial strain from my budget and partner, and allowed me to focus on my work as an advocate/educator. This wage increase has helped me to pay off my student loans, and start saving for a new/used car. I am not only thankful, but relieved that the legislature has seen how valuable advocates are. I am hopeful for the future and longevity of sexual assault centers to continue



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to serve the needs of our communities not only through prevention education, but hospital accompaniments, support groups, helpline, court accompaniments, assisting survivors in making police reports and protection from abuse orders, and so much more.”

In addition to funding this important forensic kit initiative, I urge you to also move ongoing support for advocates into the baseline budget.

Thank you for your time. I’m happy to answer any questions.