

Chairman Fecteau, Vice-Chair Daughtry, and fellow council members.
Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony.

My name is Joanna Stokinger and I come to you today in support of this legislation (LD 1139). I am a proud victim advocate and have been working with crime victims since 2002 in various capacities. In Maine, since 2016, I have worked with domestic violence victims as an advocate with the Maine DOC, surviving family members of homicide victims with the Maine AGs office, and as an elder advocate working with domestic violence victims over the age of 60. Currently, I am the lead advocate/navigator with the Maine Resiliency Center supporting victims and individuals impacted by the October 25, 2023, Lewiston Mass Shooting.

I am not speaking on behalf of any of the above agencies – but as a surviving grandmother of a homicide victim and as a former VOCA funded advocate. Without this funding, I would not have had the career that I have had supporting and assisting hundreds of victims of crime. Since the beginning of my work with victims of crime in 2002, I have felt there were not enough victim advocates to carry the caseloads or handle the capacity of the victims that have a right to victim services. I can attest to not being alone in feeling this way. Every victim advocate I have ever worked with or come across at conferences over the years has stated that there isn't enough of us to support the victims that already exist, let alone the rising caseloads.

I thought about all the families of homicide victims in Maine that I supported through trials and court hearings. I thought about who would help people like them in the future if the funding wasn't there. I have spent many hours explaining to victims and survivors that the justice system isn't created for them. It's a fact and it's the system we have, but I believe we can do better for victims of crime.

I can't give you a specific number of people I have assisted since I began my work as an advocate; however, I can give you a snapshot of what a victim advocate really does and why funding these positions is so important.

- I have sat and held hands with mothers who have lost their children to murder through a two-week jury trial.
- I have attended safety planning meetings with terrified domestic violence victims whose offenders are preparing to be released from prison.
- I have sat with, hugged and cried with family members while detectives and prosecutors explain to them that they will hear about the heinous acts that took their loved one's life in open court with the media present.
- I have listened to audio recordings with a mother of her daughter's voice as she attempts to get help from law enforcement because her ex-boyfriend was threatening to kill her. She had to wait until the courthouse opened after a holiday weekend to try to get a protection order. Before that could happen, her ex-boyfriend murdered her and the father of her children, while the children were left with their parents' corpses.
- I have reviewed dozens of autopsy reports with mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, and adult children - to give them some sense of what the medical examiner will be testifying to about the murder of their child.
- I have held back the hair of a vomiting mother after she listened to a defendant deny on the stand that he raped, sodomized, and killed her daughter.
- I have crawled under a house in the winter in an attempt to help a mother locate her daughter's beloved cat after she was murdered by her boyfriend.

Ask any prosecutor if they could do their jobs as efficiently as they do without a victim advocate. Ask the medical examiner's office if it would be easier or harder to coordinate with families and funeral homes without the help of an advocate. I have spoken with detectives with MSP MCU and asked them if they would prefer to have a homicide trial without a victim advocate present to assist. The response is always something "please don't even say that, knock on wood" or "No, thank you". In Maine, I personally know of many advocates who have been doing this work as long or longer than I have, and they all have high caseloads, and those caseloads aren't going down.

Please don't allow crime victims in Maine suffer further because of lack of funding.

Thank you.

Joanna Stokinger
Winslow, Maine