

# mecasa

MAINE COALITION AGAINST  
SEXUAL ASSAULT

March 27, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Katie Church and I am submitting testimony today on behalf of the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA), the organization which 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 victim-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 LD 1092, "An Act to Prevent the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the State."** Many thanks to Representative Stover for introducing this bill.

While often perceived to be a problem of larger states, the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) happens all over the country, including here in Maine. Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children is a form of human trafficking and includes a range of crimes where someone is profiting financially from the sexual abuse of a child<sup>1</sup>. Since 2018, our sexual assault support centers and Children's Advocacy Centers have seen 135 cases of CSEC and we know that this is far from the full picture.

While Maine's current response to CSEC has many strengths, there are also significant gaps that need attention. For background, I'll start by describing Maine's current response. Mandated reports about concerns of CSEC are made to DHHS or prosecutors. DHHS and partners then make

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<sup>1</sup> *Commercial sexual exploitation of children*. Maine Sex Trafficking and Exploitation Network. (2017). Retrieved March 16, 2023, from <https://www.mainesten.org/commercial-sexual-exploitation-of-children.html>

referrals to Maine's Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) who convene a team of law enforcement and community providers to wrap around the child and family and address their needs.

The proposal outlined in this bill is designed to respond to Maine's specific challenges following a needs assessment with providers around the state. The assessment highlighted what Maine's communities already know – resources are lacking all along the continuum of care. What we're proposing addresses three of the most vital components of service expansion that can become a strong foundation for Maine's future work.

First, the coordination of teams responding to trafficked kids needs more resources. CSEC cases are resource intensive – requiring larger teams of providers staying engaged for longer periods of time and demand workers with specialized skills in identifying and supporting trafficked kids. In one place in the state, we have a CSEC Coordinator housed at a CAC (you'll hear from her soon) who has the skills to lead these teams – effectively increasing identification of CSEC in that area and improving the quality of the response to the child and family. We want and need to expand this model. This bill would expand this model to cover the middle and northern parts of the state.

Second, CSEC victims and their families require intensive, flexible, and ongoing support that is currently unavailable to them. Trafficked kids have complex needs – housing, trauma exposure, school retention, substance use treatment, criminal justice engagement, poverty – I could go on. They need case workers who are specially trained and who are part of a program committed to spend significant resources on individual kids and families to truly wrap around them. These case workers need to be persistent and to respond to signs of trafficking even before there is a confirmation. By doing this, we can not only respond to more kids in a better way, but also can *prevent* trafficking by identifying kids who are at high risk but not yet trafficked. This bill would create three of these intensive case managers.

Finally, Maine needs to better support the systems who are already responding to trafficked kids. This bill would fund one position within the Department of Health and Human Services to improve identification and response from the department on CSEC and sexual abuse (a significant risk factor for trafficking) and a half-time position at MECASA to support the specialist at the Department as well as the growing programming around the state.

Survivors of CSEC are strong. They are capable of healing. And they're falling through the cracks in the system that is designed to protect them. Please help us to build out the services to support these kids and give them the chance to heal.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

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## About Maine's Sexual Assault Service Providers

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*