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January 29, 2024

TO: Maine Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

FROM: Burcu Sagioglu
Policy & Advocacy Associate
Joyful Heart Foundation

RE: Testimony in Support of LD2129

Good morning. My name is Burcu Sagioglu. I am the policy and advocacy associate at the Joyful Heart Foundation, also a 2017 Colby College graduate.

Honorable Chair Beebe-Center, Chair Salisbury, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity and for listening to my testimony in favor of LD2129.

Joyful Heart Foundation is a national organization founded by “Law & Order: SVU” actress and advocate Mariska Hargitay. Since 2016, we have made ending the backlog of untested rape kits our top priority. We have been involved in rape kit reform in almost every state in the country, and are excited to be in front of this committee today.

Our organization strongly supports LD2129, which requires the establishment of a rape kit tracking system with a victim portal. This is a recognized federal best practice to improve the way forensic evidence is handled, and ensures transparency and accountability. It also follows the recommendations in a 2018 study report by MECASA and the Muskie School.

An important feature of tracking systems is the victim portal, which allows survivors to see where their kit is at all times. This is crucial to their healing and well-being, as it allows them to control when they obtain critical information about their kits. Joyful Heart’s research on victim notification found that access to information about a survivor’s kit can counter the loss of control and self-determination that are at the core of the sexual assault experience. Sadly, many survivors leave the hospital and never hear about their rape kit again.

Some survivors ask to get information about their kits, but it is difficult for them to call and tell their story to different people on the phone multiple times. And sometimes, even after reaching out, they never get an answer due to a lack of standardized rape kit handling procedures.

We must remember what survivors go through to have these kits done. It’s not an easy process. Survivors in Maine deserve to know where their kit is at all times. Just like you can follow your package on amazon, a victim should be able to track their rape kit.

What's more, tracking systems make law enforcement and prosecutors' jobs easier by allowing them to follow crucial evidence from start to finish.

We also strongly support a statewide inventory of untested rape kits in law enforcement possession. A thorough count of rape kits provides a full picture of rape kit submission and testing procedures across the state, and guides legislatures as they appropriate and target resources.

32 states passed laws to implement a rape kit tracking system, and 45 states completed an inventory of untested kits. We hope the committee votes favorably on this bill, so Maine can join these states. Survivors deserve nothing less.

We submitted a longer, written testimony as well. In response to the question to Rep. Geiger New York has a central repository and we would be glad to share information on it.

Thank you again for your time. I am available to answer any questions.