



## **Maine LD 2136: An Act to Support Victims of Trafficking in Response to Federal Funding Cuts**

**Alicia W. Peters**, University of New England

Dear Sen. Ingwersen, Rep. Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

I regret that I am unable to attend the hearing for LD 2136 in person and greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of the bill.

In addition to being a faculty member in the School of Criminology, Society, and Politics and affiliated faculty in Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of New England, I am a resident of Portland and a member of the Maine chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network. The Scholars Strategy Network is a volunteer network of engaged scholars from across the state who work to strengthen public policy by sharing clear, evidence-informed expertise with decision-makers and communities. I offer this testimony based on my professional experience, research, and community engagement and do not speak on behalf of the University of New England.

My research falls under what is often referred to as public anthropology, critically-applied anthropology, or community-engaged scholarship. According to the Center for a Public Anthropology, this approach encourages scholars “to address public problems in public ways.” Utilizing qualitative, ethnographic research methods, I explore questions related to human trafficking—forcing people to perform work against their will through various types of physical and psychological coercion—in the context of the United States (most recently in Maine and New Hampshire). My research weaves together themes related to law, policy, structural vulnerability, and survivor experiences of victimization and criminality before, during, and after trafficking. I strive to produce scholarship that is socially relevant, survivor-informed, and that has meaningful applications to policy-development and improvement.

Most people don’t think about human trafficking happening in Maine, but estimates suggest that hundreds of cases occur in our state each year, both for forced commercial sex work and other types of labor. One of the collaborations I am most proud of is a longstanding relationship with the organization Preble Street and its Anti-Trafficking Services program, the largest dedicated anti-trafficking program in the state. Since 2016, we have collaborated on numerous trainings, presentations, and grants and have built a partnership based on our shared commitment to improving the lives of survivors of trafficking.

On September 30th, the Department of Justice (DOJ) Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) ended funding to over 100 victim service providers serving at least 3,000 survivors across the country by letting trafficking victim services grants expire. Preble Street’s Anti-Trafficking Services Program, a federal grantee since 2013, was one of the organizations that lost funding resulting in a major gap in their capacity to meet the basic needs of survivors. The FY25 grant competition was delayed by nine months with no explanation.

Preble Street received 350 referrals to its Anti-Trafficking Services program over the last three years. 157 survivors, or 45 percent of the program's caseload were funded by the OVC grant over the last year. Those survivors hailed from seven counties across Maine and included teens and adults of all genders, foreign nationals and U.S. citizens, and individuals trafficked for commercial sex work, drug selling, domestic work, hotel work, landscaping, and agricultural labor. Now, due to the ongoing lapse in funding, Preble Street's anti-trafficking program has had to start a waiting list for services.

My research has shown the role vulnerability and failed systems play in the lives of trafficking survivors. Survivors often lack safe, affordable housing. In addition, they may experience inequitable access to education, dental care, mental health treatment, and other healthcare resources. In my work I've advocated for shoring up systems, as opposed to intervening after the fact, to address the root causes of trafficking and prevent it from happening. Intervention is essential to interrupting human trafficking when it occurs, but it should be the last line of defense, and prevention the first.

Yet, rather than being expanded, the very systems in need of bolstering to prevent trafficking are being dismantled. Recent cuts to the federal job force and funding to programs that support the most vulnerable members of our communities, including proposed cuts to Medicaid and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) voucher program, mean that more Mainers will fall through the cracks, and we will see more instances of trafficking.

The funds associated with LD 2136 would replace one year of Preble Street's OVC funding lost due to the delayed federal grant competition and allow Preble Street to continue offering critical services to help survivors exit trafficking and achieve stability.

Trafficking survivors are real people facing terrible circumstances—not just at the hands of individual traffickers but also as a result of structural violence and the way society fails to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our communities. While conducting fieldwork on trafficking for my recent book, it became clear that the survivors I was learning about and interviewing were not just nameless strangers; they were members of my community. I spoke to frontline workers who had assisted high school classmates. I myself connected the dots and realized that one survivor was the aunt of one of my daughter's best friends from preschool. Trafficking survivors are all around us. I urge you and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services to support LD 2136 and ensure survivors in Maine have access to the vital services needed to bridge the gap in federal funding.