



Working to end sexual violence in Maryland

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Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 413
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February 2, 2021

The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) is a non-profit membership organization that includes the State's seventeen rape crisis centers, law enforcement, mental health and health care providers, attorneys, educators, survivors of sexual violence and other concerned individuals. MCASA includes the Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI), a statewide legal services provider for survivors of sexual assault. MCASA represents the unified voice and combined energy of all of its members working to eliminate sexual violence. We urge the Budget and Taxation Committee to report favorably on Senate Bill 413.

Senate Bill 413 – Maryland Legal Services Corporation Funding – Abandoned Property Fund

The Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC), together with many bar and community leaders, is urging the General Assembly to enact Senate Bill 413. This bill would allocate additional funds from Maryland's abandoned property fund to help maintain Maryland's legal services safety net.

MCASA's Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI) receives significant funding from the Maryland Legal Services Corporation. With this support, SALI serves low-income victims of sexual assault all over the State. SALI uses MLSC funding to support attorneys and advocates in cases including school & education issues, peace orders, protective orders (including for incest), U-visas to allow immigrant victims to stay in the US and assist with prosecution, privacy matters, and other matters arising from the sexual assault or abuse. MLSC funding is especially critical in child sexual abuse cases.

COVID is increasing the need for legal services.

Perpetrators are emboldened by the pandemic. They are using the pandemic to gain or renew access to victims, intimidate survivors into silence, and interfere with survivors' attempts to seek safety and justice. Sexual assault survivors are dealing with the "paradox of social distancing," increasing economic instability, homelessness, job loss, mental health needs, amplified trauma, and isolation. This crisis has led not only to an increase in the number of survivors seeking services, but to an increase in the number of services survivors seek.

The need for legal services is increasing. At the **Sexual Assault Legal Institute**,

183 survivors were helped in December 2019
318 survivors were helped in December 2020

This increase of 135 cases December to December is a result of the COVID pandemic.

Sexual assault and child sexual abuse can impact a wide array of legal issues.

Examples of MLSC-funded cases at SALI include the following (identifying information has been changed to protect privacy):

“**Gina**”, ten year old girl, was sexually assaulted by her step-father and step-uncle on separate occasions. Gina is autistic and has challenges communicating. Since the incidents she has had sleep disorders, shows signs of disassociation, and has begun therapy and counseling. Despite her disability, Gina was able to help prosecute and convict both perpetrators in Frederick County Circuit Court. Gina and her mother were in the U.S. without documentation. After the criminal case was completed they went to the local rape crisis center which referred Gina and her mother to SALI. A SALI attorney worked with the clinicians helping Gina and documented the abuse and its effects. The attorney then obtained law enforcement certification verifying that Gina and her mother helped prosecute a violent criminal. With this documentation as support, a petition for a U-visa was filed and granted. Now Gina and her mother are in America legally and continuing to work to heal from Gina’s sexual abuse.

“**Jennifer**” is a 12 year old girl who was fondled by her biological father while visiting him in Prince George’s County. After she her mother about the abuse, the mother filed a Petition for a Protective Order and reported the abuse to the police. She was referred to SALI by both the local sexual assault program and through the written information police provide to all crime victims. A SALI advocate performed and intake and provided safety planning; the case was then assigned to an attorney. The SALI attorney advised Jennifer’s mother about her options and discussed how a civil protective order proceeding could impact the criminal case. The SALI attorney then provided representation in the protective order case, preparing three witnesses to testify: the victim, her mother, and a babysitter who was the first to hear about the abuse. Fortunately, the SALI attorney negotiated a consent order, so the child was spared having to testify. Keeping witnesses off the stand also helps protect the criminal case by reducing opportunities for impeachment. While the protective order was entered without a trial, it was strong: it ordered that the perpetrator stay away from the victim, granted the mother custody and provided for no visitation between the perpetrator and the victim. After the order was entered on the record, officers immediately arrested the perpetrator and he was detained pending his criminal trial.

“**James**”, a 7 year old boy in Anne Arundel County, lived in public housing with his family. One day a 13 year old boy who also lived in the housing project took James and another boy into the woods and sexually assaulted them. After telling his mother and the police what happened, James became afraid to leave the house. James’s mother, “Linda”, contacted SALI for assistance in having the family transferred to another public housing project.

SALI advocated with the Anne Arundel Housing Commission on the family's behalf. The family was moved to the top of the waiting list and was placed in a new apartment as soon as one became available, instead of enduring a long waiting process (months instead of potentially 1-2 years). By the time the family was moved, the date to register new students in the new school district had passed. SALI again intervened by contacting the new school district and advocating that the family be able to register late due to the extenuating circumstances. The children were soon successfully enrolled and a victim of child sexual abuse is able to continue his recovery.

Legal services like those described above are a vital part of Maryland's safety net for children, women, and men victimized by sexual violence. As our State searches for ways to respond to sex offenses, we must continue to remember individual victims and all of their needs, including their need for legal services.

MCASA member programs across Maryland use MLSC funding to help survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse. In addition to SALI, these programs include the Life Crisis Center on the Lower Eastern Shore, the Southern Maryland Center for Family Advocacy, Citizens Assisting and Sheltering the Abused in Washington County, Heartly House in Frederick, HopeWorks in Howard, Sexual Assault/Spousal Abuse Resource Center (SARC) in Harford County, and others. Together, these programs provide legal services for over 7500 victims and survivors annually.

Without the support of the Maryland Legal Services Corporation and the programs it funds, low-income victims and survivors would often have no access to the legal services needed to recover, heal, and have access to justice.

**The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault and
its Sexual Assault Legal Institute
urges the Budget and Taxation Committee to
report favorably on Senate Bill 413**