



---

## Working to end sexual violence in Maryland

---

P.O. Box 8782  
Silver Spring, MD 20907  
Phone: 301-565-2277  
Fax: 301-565-3619

For more information contact:  
Lisae C. Jordan, Esquire  
443-995-5544  
mcasa.org

### **Testimony Supporting House Bill 556 with Amendments** **Lisae C. Jordan, Executive Director & Counsel** February 17, 2023

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.

We urge the Economic Matters Committee and the Cannabis Reform Work Group to include amendments to HB556 to allocate some portion of the revenue generated by cannabis to the Maryland Legal Services Corporation.

**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 and economic pressures are increasing the need for legal services.**

Globally and locally, the pandemic created the perfect storm, isolating victims from access to vital services, and giving abusers ultimate power and control. We have seen a dramatic change in the complexity of needs of clients we are serving. Many are now experiencing severe substance use disorder, untreated mental health diagnoses, housing and job challenges, and more. The legal services needed to address and support survivors are also complex. Clients who previously may have sought help with a family law case, might now also seeking help with unemployment claim appeals, landlord tenant issues, and consumer issues. SALI has a wait list for services and funds are desperately needed.

#### **Workforce pressure are compounding funding concerns.**

Like most legal services providers, SALI is facing serious challenges recruiting and retaining attorneys. The agency has invested in salary increases and provides a flexible and supportive work environment. However, we continue to have vacancies and the staff that have been hired lack experience and need additional training and supervision. Again, more funds are desperately needed.

**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 told 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 an 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 also 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.**

This safety net is fraying. We urge this Committee to help meet the legal services needs of low income Marylanders.

**The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault and its  
Sexual Assault Legal Institute  
urges the Economic Matters Committee to  
report favorably on House Bill 556 with Amendments  
as Proposed by the Maryland Legal Services Corporation**