

Co-Chair Senator Burdick and Rep. Williamson and members of the Joint Committee on Capitol Culture:

My name is Jayne Downing, and I am the Executive Director of the Center for Hope & Safety (CHS). Our agency has served victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking and human trafficking in Marion and Polk Counties for 45 years. Last year, our program received more than 26,000 contacts between our 24-hour crisis line, support group attendance, those walking in for services at our Advocacy office in downtown Salem, and in emails, texts, and through social media platforms.

I began my work with survivors 28 years ago as a crisis line volunteer and have been the Executive Director for more than 21 years. Over that time, I have worked with thousands of victims of domestic and sexual violence, providing them with confidential supportive services.

Tonight, I want to share with you from my perspective the importance of having confidential advocates. When someone contacts our program, it is not uncommon for their first question to be, "Is this confidential?" or "Are you going to tell anyone about this?" When I assure the person our conversation is completely confidential, you can immediately see in their body language, or hear in her or his voice, the relief.

We have all heard of someone having a negative experience when they came forward to report their victimization. In my experience, until a victim has a chance to speak with someone "off the record", they may believe the negative outcome will be their fate as well. Sadly, this is often reinforced by well-meaning family members or co-workers. The promise of confidentiality allows us to meet the survivor where they are in their experience. It allows the survivor the space to ask all their questions and identify concerns. Once survivors fully understand their options, they can make an informed decision about the direction they want to take.

One of the common sayings in our work is, "You don't know what you don't know". Every victim reacts differently to trauma. One survivor may be ready to report immediately, for another it may take time to decide, and another survivor may never feel it is safe to come forward. This may be due to fear of retribution, past negative trauma experiences, cultural differences, spiritual beliefs, or other reasons we cannot even begin to understand. It is so critical we do not add additional trauma, by forcing a survivor to do something they are not ready to do.

When I receive calls from family members, friends, or co-workers that say, “Can’t I (or the Center) force them to talk or call the police?”, I always ask, “Think about if you were in this situation, would you want someone to make that choice for you?” When they think about it, the answer is always “No, I would want to make my own decisions.” When someone has been victimized or harassed, their choice has been taken away. One of the most important steps we take at the Center for Hope & Safety is giving survivors the choice of where they go from here.

Sexual violence and harassment are happening at epidemic proportions in our state and in our nation, and sadly, have been for many years. I commend the Legislature, and each of you, for working to end the damage done by those who choose to commit violence against Oregonians.

We are proud the legislature saw fit several years ago to understand there is not just one “right door” to seeking safety and support from violence and made confidential privileged advocates a part of the solution. I know it has made a difference for the tens of thousands of victims that have turned to our program and the other confidential advocacy programs around the state.

I am happy to answer any questions about our program and the services we provide. Thank you.