

Portland Press Herald

May 5, 2023

Maine Voices: We must limit early release of domestic violence offenders

The rules governing the release of our communities' most dangerous criminals – those harming people they purport to love – are far too lax.

BY PATRISHA MCLEAN SPECIAL TO THE PRESS HERALD

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrishia McLean is the president and founder of Finding Our Voices. On May 10 at the Freeport Community Library, the organization will screen a series of powerful short films on coercive control and the impact on children, followed by a community conversation led by eight Maine survivors of domestic abuse aged between 18 and 83. For more information about this free event, visit findingourvoices.net.

“Why is the man who strangled me,” a young woman asked, “posting on social media a week after starting his two-year jail sentence?”

One domestic abuse survivor's decision to break her silence led me to discover that our communities' most dangerous criminals – those harming people they purport to love – are essentially being granted “Get Out Of Jail Free” cards in a community confinement monitoring program that neither confines nor monitors.

This discovery led to [L.D. 692](#), which is sponsored by my representative, Rep. Vicki Doudera, D-Camden, and would put restrictions on domestic abusers applying for release from jail in Maine after serving one-third of their sentence.

Breaking the silence of domestic abuse is the mandate of the nonprofit I started following the domestic violence arrest of my then-husband of 29 years. Seven survivors connected to the nonprofit, Finding Our Voices, testified in support of the bill last month, sharing some of the mayhem that results from the way that rights and consideration currently bypass victims and flow to the perpetrators.

The most visible aspect of Finding Our Voices' efforts are posters featuring my photo portraits of 45 Maine domestic abuse survivors, including an incarcerated woman and Gov. Janet Mills. Over the past three years, we have papered 85 Maine towns with these posters, having emotional conversations along with the way with business owners, employees, customers and passers-by.

Straight from the mouths of hundreds of victims of domestic abuse, here is some of what I have learned on this Main Street talking tour.

Way too many judges, guardian ad litem, defense lawyers, police and others charged with protecting victims of domestic violence are ignorant about such 101 dynamics as emotional abuse and power and control. We urgently need to mandate victim-centric domestic violence education for all, especially judges.

Batterer's intervention programs, online or offline, do not work. These programs, which often take the place of a jail sentence, do not stop abusers from reoffending, and can even stand to enhance their manipulation of victims and the system. Often, women are losing custody of their children to violent and dangerous men because, due to the financial control of abusers, the men can afford lawyers and they cannot.

The first step in solving any problem is to shine a light on it. Who better to shine a light on the huge problem of domestic abuse (half of all homicides in Maine, year after year, resulting from it) than those it directly impacts? Here, from the public testimony of Finding Our Voices survivors on behalf of L.D. 692, are Maine voices we all need to listen to.

Sandra, Cumberland County: "I was only notified 15 minutes or less that he was being released. I didn't have any plans in place that day because of this early release and inadequate notification. I did scramble to ask a friend, during Thanksgiving holidays, to stay with her, which put her in danger as well. A victim should not have to constantly look over their shoulder and I live in constant terror."

Nicole, Androscoggin County: "I have no doubt that [my ex-husband] will reoffend because taking a [batterer's intervention] class is barely a consequence for physically assaulting a loved one. My children will not be safe in his care. I will not be safe if he knows where I am."

Mandy, Hancock County: "Our youngest, who was 10 at the time, refused to leave my side because "Daddy won't hurt you as badly if I'm here, Mommy." ... For months I planned my way out, knowing that if I didn't set up a safety plan, one day he would kill me and most likely in front of her."

Meg, Cumberland County: "It is time we stopped protecting abusers and start protecting their victims."