

Lois Galgay Reckitt, women’s rights activist and South Portland lawmaker, dies at 78

Reckitt was the longtime director of Family Crisis Services in Portland and was the driving force behind Maine's proposed Equal Rights Amendment.



BY [JOE LAWLOR](#) STAFF WRITER



Rep. Lois Galgay Reckitt, D-South Portland, shown at the State House in June. She pressed for an Equal Rights Amendment for five decades. *Robert F. Bukaty/Associated Press*

Lois Galgay Reckitt, a state representative from South Portland and a longtime activist for women’s rights, died Monday. She was 78.

“I am so saddened by Lois’ passing,” said Speaker of the House Rachel Talbot Ross, D-Portland. “She will be remembered as a trailblazer, a feminist icon, and for her relentless efforts on behalf of Maine women and families. I was [blessed to know Lois for five decades](#) and I will never forget her

courage, resiliency, and her fierce dedication to justice. Her legacy of leadership and her tenacity will continue to inspire us all.”

Reckitt’s family said she died of colon cancer.

“I’ve always admired my Aunt Lois” Reckitt’s nephew Dan Saulnier, told the Press Herald on Tuesday. “She spent her whole life in service to others and fighting for a more just world. And yet she was always there if I needed support, or advice, or just to get away. I’ve never met anyone quite like her, and I’ll miss her deeply.”

In an oral history project for the University of Southern Maine in 2020, Reckitt told an interviewer how she was arrested twice for civil disobedience in the 1980s. One time she protested apartheid at the South African embassy in Washington, D.C., and the other time she was arrested in front of the White House for protesting the Reagan administration’s response to the AIDS crisis, which she said was inadequate.

“It was because the president (Reagan) never said the word AIDS,” Reckitt said, according to the transcript. “Reagan was such a ditz.”

Starting even before she was elected as a Democratic lawmaker, Reckitt tried for decades to pass an Equal Rights Amendment in Maine to prohibit discrimination based on gender, but fell short in the last legislative session. Her quest was made extra difficult because, as a proposed amendment to the Maine Constitution, it would have required the support of two-thirds of the state Legislature before going to voters in a statewide referendum.

Senate Majority Leader Eloise Vitelli, D-Arrowsic, said Reckitt “never gave up” in trying to pass the ERA. And while that goal evaded her, Reckitt had many triumphs, Vitelli said.

“She will be deeply missed, but I know her legacy will serve as inspiration for generations of champions for equal rights,” Vitelli said.

Reckitt worked on numerous issues promoting women’s rights and the rights of other disadvantaged people over her lifetime, including helping to found the Maine Women’s Lobby. She was a board member for the National Organization for Women, and was the longtime director of Family Crisis Services in Portland.

Destie Hohman Sprague, executive director of the Maine Women’s Lobby, said Reckitt “never compromised her beliefs.”

“She infused our organization with her tenacious commitment to gender equity. We are grateful for her lifelong commitment to our organization and to gender justice in Maine and across the nation,” Sprague said.



Lois Reckitt, seen in 2015, often spoke out about domestic violence as executive director of Family Crisis Services. *Whitney Hayward/Staff Photographer*

During this year’s legislative session, Reckitt successfully sponsored a bill to partially decriminalize prostitution. Gov. Janet Mills signed the bill into law in June.

“We are long overdue to better protect and decriminalize sellers engaged in prostitution without legalizing pimping and sex buying,” Reckitt said in a statement to The Associated Press in June.

Mills paid tribute to Reckitt in a statement on Tuesday.

‘A TIRELESS DEFENDER’

“Representative Reckitt was a tireless defender of the rights of women and girls throughout her life, wielding her sharp wit and her sense of humor to bring people together and to make a difference for her community,” Mills said. “As the longtime executive director of Family Crisis Services in Cumberland County and, later, as a legislator for the people of South

Portland, Lois never stopped trying to make our state better for everyone. In a week already marked by such deep loss, I am devastated to lose her as well. I knew Lois for nearly five decades; she was a dear friend, and I will miss her deeply. I extend my condolences to her friends, her family and her community during this difficult time.”

Senate President Troy Jackson said, “Rep. Reckitt was truly a remarkable person. She led with unparalleled conviction and unmatched action. Her work to prevent domestic violence and support survivors exemplifies how she lived her life – not only did she provide direct care for vulnerable women and families on the ground at the Family Crisis Shelter, but she spent her life advocating for and securing transformational policy change.”

Reckitt spent 36 years as executive director of Family Crisis Services in Cumberland County, which serves victims of domestic violence and promotes prevention efforts. In the 1980s, she was elected national executive vice president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and was a co-founder of the Human Rights Campaign Fund.

In the oral history project, Reckitt told an interviewer that she married twice in the 1970s before realizing she was a lesbian. She later married Lyn Carter, her surviving spouse.

“I’ve had a good life and I’m not done yet,” Reckitt said in 2020.

She has two children and five grandchildren, according to her bio on the Maine Legislature website.

Reckitt openly discussed her colon cancer diagnosis earlier this year, including during a speech on the floor of the Maine House of Representatives in June while arguing in support of expanding abortion rights. The abortion bill was signed into law.

The secretary of state will set a date for a special election to fill Reckitt's seat in the Maine Legislature.

Her family is hosting a celebration of Reckitt's life at the Maine Irish Heritage Center on Nov. 12. There will be a 1 p.m. service, followed by a 2 p.m. reception. The public is invited to attend. In lieu of flowers, the Reckitt family encourages friends to send donations to the Through These Doors charity or the Maine Irish Heritage Center.