



Testimony of Whitney Parrish
LD 1 - Ought To Pass
Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and
Financial Affairs
February 23, 2021

Good morning Senator Sanborn, Representative Tepler, and distinguished members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Affairs:

My name is Whitney Parrish, and I am the Advocacy and Communications Director of Health Equity Alliance (HEAL). Health Equity Alliance is a nonpartisan nonprofit public health and harm reduction organization that envisions and works toward a world where health justice is realized for all Mainers, including and especially our most vulnerable. We are here to urge you to support LD 1, *An Act To Establish The COVID-19 Bill of Rights*.

Health Equity Alliance's history begins with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the provision of care and support to HIV-positive individuals living primarily in rural, coastal, and northern Maine. Expansion of medical and social supports, funded by the passage of the Ryan White Cares Act in 1990, bolstered services significantly. Over the years, our prevention and mitigation efforts expanded, focused, and strengthened as we learned more about how to address infectious disease spread and received the buy-in of elected officials.

Nondiscriminatory, low barrier care and protections for affected individuals remain a cornerstone of addressing the crisis, and ensuring people can live full, healthy lives despite infection is our mission.

There is much to be learned from the HIV/AIDS epidemic as we respond to the COVID-19 pandemic: there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to addressing either crisis; disparities in infection rates and treatment run deep and along race and class lines; nondiscriminatory healthcare and treatment access are key to our primary goals of keeping people alive, healthy, and safe; and the buy-in and commitment of politicians and decision-makers to take the situation seriously often means the difference between mitigating a crisis or escalating it.

We are deeply grateful to President Jackson and Speaker Fecteau for their commitment to take the COVID-19 pandemic seriously and working to ensure all Mainers, especially our most vulnerable, have protections and continued access to the care they require to maintain their health and well-being.

As an organization that serves people who have experienced deep historic marginalization and discrimination—including people who actively use drugs—we know access to services via telehealth or medications in larger supply amounts reduces trips to the pharmacy and

¹ *Maine Has Nation's Worst COVID-19 Racial Disparity*. <https://www.pressherald.com/2020/06/21/maine-has-nations-worst-covid-19-racial-disparity/>. June 2020.



can mean the difference between someone accessing the services they need and deserve, rather than slipping through the cracks completely. As a harm reduction organization, we recognize the critical role treatment options can play in effective, evidence-based harm reduction policies, practices, and services. The path to recovery is arduous and personal, but nobody makes it to “recovery” if they die along the way. We believe enshrining telehealth expansion and access to treatment during civil states of emergency is an important tool in ensuring individuals struggling with chaotic drug use have the level of support they need when access may be otherwise affected.

This protected access to telehealth and prescription medication is of particular importance to our clients who are living with HIV as well—especially those in more rural, resource-poor areas like Down East, Mid Coast, and northern Maine. We do want to acknowledge that disruption of careⁱⁱ for people living with HIV is still a concern even with these provisions, especially since even telehealth access by phone can be challenging with unreliable service and financial restrictions of data plans. Nonetheless, we do believe this is an important step to mitigating disruption in care and maintaining the health of our communities.

Looking to our past is how we begin to build road maps for how we address public health crises now and in the future. We believe LD 1 is a proposal that supports vulnerable Mainers, and it speaks to and begins to address the challenges our clients face every day. We strongly urge the committee to vote ‘Ought to Pass’ on LD 1.

Thank you for your attention and consideration. I am happy to answer questions.

ⁱⁱ Park, S. and Pinto, R. *COVID-19 Pandemic Disrupts HIV Continuum of Care and Prevention: Implications for Research and Practice Concerning Community-Based Organizations and Frontline Providers*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7186186/>. April 2020.