

Jodi Hayashida
Maine Council of Churches

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety: I'm the Rev. Dr. Jodi Cohen Hayashida, I am the minister of First Universalist Church of Auburn and a resident of that town, and I am here today on behalf of the Maine Council of Churches to testify in support of LD 967.

The Rev. Dr. William Barber often speaks of what he calls the "death measure" of regressive public policy, which is not just awareness but acceptance that a policy will cause people, usually some of the most vulnerable among us, to die. Maine's current policies around drug use and substance use disorder have a severe death measure. Our choice not to treat the opioid epidemic as a public health crisis allowed 500 Mainers to die of overdose last year alone. Our policy of criminalization keeps thousands more locked in a vicious cycle that spins attempts to self-medicate trauma into felony convictions, which create barriers to the resources necessary to recover, leading to deeper trauma. In addition, we know that these policies disproportionately impact poor people and people of color.

I have served my church for 20 years. In that time I have spent countless hours sitting with people struggling to overcome substance use disorder and many more hours with the families and friends of those who have lost loved ones to that struggle. I have had words turn to ash in my mouth as I held a beloved community member, my silent witness the only thing I had to offer in the face of her shattering grief at the overdose death of her daughter. And again as I held the trembling hands of a grandmother who could not make sense of the brutal murder of her grandson- a direct result of the criminalization of substance use. And again as I stumbled through a prayer at the funeral of a young adult who had everything to live for but instead overdosed alone in a room. The weight of that grief never leaves me. Neither does the burden of anger that comes with knowing how much of that suffering we could have prevented if we chose to treat every life as sacred and worthy of care instead of abandoning some as collateral damage in the War on Drugs.

It is well past time for us to move beyond the death measure of our regressive policies and instead choose evidence based, life-saving practices. The gift of this moment is that we already know what some of those practices look like and we already know that the beginning of that shift is fundamental reframing of this crisis away from criminalization and towards public health, as LD 967 does. At a deeper level, we know that when we, at a policy level, choose empathy over judgment, compassion over punishment, and treatment over prosecution, we are actively choosing life over death.

The Maine Council of Churches urges you to choose life and support the passage of LD 967.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Dr. Jodi Cohen Hayashida
On behalf of the board of the Maine Council of Churches