

An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

Testimony in support of the Governor's Proposed Initiatives Relating to Behavioral Health Services and Response to the Opioid Crisis

February 24, 2023

Greetings Senators Rotundo and Baldacci, Representatives Sachs and Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriation and Financial Affairs (AFA) and Health and Human Services; my name is Ninette Irabaruta, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy at United Way of Southern Maine (UWSM).

I am here today to express United Way of Southern Maine's (UWSM) strong support for the investments in the proposed biennial budget regarding the rate increases for behavioral health services, the expansion of children's behavioral health services, and funding to address the growing opioid crisis. The behavioral health system needs more robust support to remedy program closures, extended waitlists, and rationing of care. This is an opportunity to strengthen support for the State's behavioral health system.

There is growing concern and public recognition around mental health in Maine communities. The rate of suicide deaths in Maine was 19 per 100,000 in 2020, an increase from 16.8 in 2016.¹ In 2021, 46% of Mainers who did not access health care did so because of cost.² For individuals living with mental illnesses and substance use disorders, access to affordable, quality health care is essential for treatment and recovery. Access to behavioral health care services can identify health conditions early on and provide opportunities for prevention. UWSM supports the proposed rate increases for behavioral health care services (on pages A-370-372), which will increase the number of providers able to provide these essential services to individuals and families across the State.

Children and youth in Maine, especially, are experiencing symptoms of mental illness at increasing rates. According to the Maine Integrated Youth Health (MIYH) Survey, 35.9% of high school students and 29.6% of middle school students felt sad or hopeless for more than two weeks in 2021.³ Moreover, 20% of high schoolers and 18.5% of middle schoolers considered suicide in 2021.⁴ In 2022, the rate of suicide for Maine youth was 16.8 per 100,000 deaths, an increase from 14.5 per 100,000 in 2021, and higher than the national rate of 10.8 per 100,000.⁵

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *CDC wonder*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>

² Kaiser Family Foundation analysis of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s restricted online data analysis system (RDAS), National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 2017 and 2018, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Data Archive. <https://www.kff.org/state-category/mental-health>

³ [Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey](#), 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *CDC wonder*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved February 22, 2023, from <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>

These numbers peaked even higher at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some COVID Emergency Response Funds were dedicated to addressing this crisis, much of that funding has ended, leaving youth vulnerable. The proposed investment in children's behavioral health services (A-366, 370, 393-400), especially in evidence-based tools and treatment options and infrastructure to support safe and consistent treatment delivery will help ensure positive health outcomes for children and families.

Additionally, the opioid crisis has had a huge impact on Maine's communities. 716 individuals died from an overdose in Maine in 2022, which is the highest since tracking began, and the State is already on track to surpass this number in 2023.⁶ 130 of these deaths were in Cumberland County alone, and 101 were in York County. There were 10,110 overdoses in 2022 -- showing that harm reduction efforts, specifically⁷. This funding will expand the capacity of Medically Supervised Withdrawal (detox) programs, a critical service for individuals starting their recovery.

UWSM supports these proposed budgetary measures to address the growing mental health and substance use concerns across the State, and we urge legislators to do the same.

I thank you for your leadership and service, and I am happy to answer any questions you have.

⁶ [Office of the Maine Attorney General, Maine Monthly Overdose Report, December 2022.](#)

⁷ Ibid.