

Testimony of Doug Dunbar from Hermon, Maine

In Support of LD 540
*An Act to Establish Peer Respite Centers for
Adults with Mental Health Challenges in Maine*

Public Hearing: April 5, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Doug Dunbar. As a person who has experienced mental health disorders on a daily basis since my earliest recollections as a child, I write to urge your support for LD 540.

In my case, stigma and fear kept me from seeking treatment. My disorders—OCD and anxiety—were concealed from everyone in my life. They were often tormenting and debilitating, but I managed my way through life until 9/11.

When those attacks occurred 21 years ago, I was working on Capitol Hill in Washington as John Baldacci's communications director in the U.S. House of Representatives. My obsessive compulsive disorder and anxiety spiraled out of control. Soon after, I began self-medicating with alcohol.

Returning to Maine, I worked as Governor Baldacci's press secretary, then served as Maine's Chief Deputy Secretary of State. During those years, my alcohol consumption increased in frequency and quantity. Eventually, I began to experience legal problems.

Very poor decision-making caused by my alcohol use disorder ultimately resulted in several months in jail during 2017 and 2018 and over a year in the Penobscot County Adult Drug Treatment Court. While incarcerated, my eyes were opened to our profound failures as a society to properly care for people who are ill and to provide appropriate community-based services and resources.

The number of individuals with mental illness who land and languish in our jails and prisons is unconscionable. Until you have witnessed and experienced what happens to individuals who are ill in places of incarceration, I am not sure you can fully appreciate our collective failures.

LD 540 is one of numerous steps we should be taking to provide alternatives for individuals who require support, guidance, encouragement, and hope. There are currently few options, and they are often harmful.

The positive impact of peer-support is increasingly well-known and valued. This legislation is a modest effort to provide settings where individuals can heal and acquire support from others whose lived experience can make a significant difference.

Thanks for your time and consideration of this request to support LD 540. Special thanks to Representative Ambureen Rana for sponsoring this important, much-needed legislation and to Senator Mike Tipping, Representative Joe Perry and Representative Laurie Osher for cosponsoring the bill.

There are ample expert sources of research and data demonstrating the beneficial impacts of peer-focused care, but I would be happy to provide additional information if you contact me (doug.dunbar@yahoo.com or 207-299-5626).