



Good afternoon Sen. Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Cate Blackford and I am the Public Policy Director for the Maine People's Alliance. Our 32,000 members stretch from Kittery to Fort Kent. We are committed to creating a state where everyone has what they need, contributes what they can, and no one is left behind.

MPA is here today to testify in opposition to both LD 986 and LD 1509. Both of these bills prioritize punishment over treatment, a strategy that has been proven over and over to fail to reduce substance use or trafficking. Rather than requiring harsher punishments, our laws need to address the opioid epidemic as a public health issue. Instead of criminalization, we need to embrace compassion. Instead of relying on outdated policies that lock people away, we need to embrace smart, evidence-based reforms that save lives.

Maine has some of the harshest drug laws in the country, and those laws disproportionately punish poor people and people of color, especially Black and African American people. In 2018, Black people made up about one percent of Maine's population; but accounted for 21 percent of Class A felony drug arrests and 15 percent of Class B felony drug arrests.<sup>1</sup>

Harsh drug laws hurt children, too. Women – and overwhelmingly mothers – bear the brunt of drug-related arrests and incarceration. In Maine, Department of Corrections data show drug arrests of women increased 25% between 2008 and 2018.<sup>2</sup>

Harsh drug laws have a ripple effect on families and communities. Separating a parent or family member through incarceration does lasting, irreparable harm to their loved ones. It's also profoundly financially damaging for families. Incarceration is associated with permanent declines in income and the loss of opportunities including education and employment for family members.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/JR-in-Maine-second-presentation1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families"; Ella Baker Center  
<http://whopaysreport.org/executive-summary/>

I want to take a minute to share the story of one of MPA's members, Brandi Staples who lives in Phippsburg. Brandi's cousin Jason passed away at the age of 36 from an overdose. He passed away 8 years ago this year. He did not live to see all the resources that we now have today and how we are trying to make things better for people with substance use disorders.

It's incredibly hard to describe what it's like to watch someone you grew up with-someone who was so bright, funny, witty and full of life become someone so shadowed, a shell of who they once were and someone so jilted by life. The only thing to live for was to get high so he could just forget the hurts of life.

Brandi lost count of how many times he went to jail or was arrested for possession or being high. It was all so ridiculous. He was never offered rehab, just jail. She wants to tell you from experience that Jail doesn't work, Jail is not tough love, Jail just teaches you how to be a better criminal, how to hide it better, it doesn't do one thing to help you into recovery. He relapsed and overdosed almost every single time he was released.

Brandi asked me to tell you she finds these bills disheartening. They do not help those in our community evolve, instead they just send us back and hold us in place. Having an addiction shouldn't be a crime. If you needed help to get better but would be punished with a crime would you want to get the help you need?

Thank you for your time today and all your hard work.