



MAINE YOUTH
JUSTICE

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Senator Pinny H. Beebe-Center, Chair
Representative Suzanne Salisbury, Chair
Committee on Criminal Justice & Public Safety

LD 986: An Act to Ensure Safer Communities by Increasing the Punishment for Crimes Involving Fentanyl

Dear Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and Members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

My name is Abdul Ali and I am the Advocacy Director with Maine Youth Justice. I reside in Portland.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to LD 986.

Maine Youth Justice is a nonpartisan campaign fighting to end youth incarceration in Maine and invest in a range of community-based supports that respond to young people's needs, support families, and build community. We are a campaign led by young people who have been incarcerated in Long Creek and are directly impacted by the juvenile justice system.

Today I am here to testify on Maine's mental health, addiction, drug purchase, and distribution issues. We all agree that the drug problem in America has exceeded the limit of handling this situation in a solution-based process so we can have healthier communities and safer environments for our children, our elderly, our sick, and all citizens of Maine's population.

I stand firmly that this bill, and bills like this, will be a detriment to the source and issue we are trying to resolve today.

Research has shown numerous explanations on how the policing and criminalization of drugs only harm the community and do not solve the direct issues of distribution, supply and demand, addiction (which is a mental health and physical health problem), over-policing, and harms that conclude in violence, negative health outcomes, and possibly death.



As a person that grew up in numerous communities that were criminalized for drug possession, like marijuana, I saw day-to-day issues that caused increased anxiety, stress, and fear had only increased the usage, the hiding, the distribution, and the spreading.

If this bill, today, spoke primarily on the mental health aspects of stress, anxiety, anger, frustration, and trauma, and the ways of relieving these issues through a solution-based approach rooted in clinical evidence on addiction and mental health, I would have urged you to pass. But it is not.

The mistake was made in the late 1990s by creating drug laws that ended up increasing violence and crime all the way up until the 1994 crime bill that was passed by President Bill Clinton. Violent crime did not erupt to the levels that it had in this country until drug laws were passed. By passing this bill, we will see the exact same negative effect that we saw in the past three decades.

I, myself, have been in the life where drug use, selling of drugs, and the environment where drugs and alcohol were used for excitement, happiness, and to escape the mental depression that we were facing in our lives due to the communities we lived in, following the destruction of communities because of policies that were created to criminalize drug usage and the selling of it.

The only solutions are clinical treatment and evidence-based solutions for mental and behavioral health, and increasing equitable opportunities for a better livelihood.

Between the 1980s and the early 2000s, the prison population has risen from 200,000 to 2.3 million people. That resulted in the loss of jobs, broken families, increased violence, increased crime, financial investment in jails and prisons, and an increased number of police officers. Thus, we have the highest population of police officers, the highest population of people in prison, the highest level of depression, and amongst the highest, compared to other counties, when it comes to drug and alcohol addiction.

If this bill, alongside the other bills in this year's legislature this session, passes, I promise you the harms that will come out of it will be greater than what we are facing today. The only solution we have is to act upon clinical research that proves that people who are addicted to drugs and alcohol can heal through support, medical professional guidance, and therapeutic processes.



Instead of investing the money in the court systems and refilling our jails again, like the way we have done in the past three decades, we could invest in clinical studied based research that proves us the solution: Healthy outcomes.

I urge this committee not to pass this bill alongside the three other bills that have been presented today, or any other bill ever that will increase the drug crime rates, and invest in the infrastructure, resources, and healing.

When coming to supply and demand, when you have less demand after people have been healed, the supply will decrease because there is no demand for it. There will be little to no use for it when we have healthy Mainers that have been healed from this *disease* that we have been fighting for decades.

It's the simple concept of supply and demand. When we finally have healthy Mainers that have been healed from this *disease* we have been fighting against for decades, there will naturally become less demand. The decrease in demand will decrease supply. And these suppliers will move to legal financial pathways to improve their livelihood, as long as they are able to see such opportunities in their communities.

We stand firm and urge this committee not to pass this bill or any other bills that result in the increased criminalization of any drugs. Instead, invest in the healing and prospering of communities and surely we will see better results.

For these reasons, we urge this Committee vote ought not to not pass LD 986.

Thank you.

Abdul Ali
Maine Youth Justice



Citations

Pew = one of the best research institutes:

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2018/03/more-imprisonment-does-not-reduce-state-drug-problems>

National Institute of Corrections (posted about the above research):

<https://nicic.gov/weblink/more-imprisonment-does-not-reduce-state-drug-problems-2018>

Locking up Drug Dealers to Save Usres Doesn't Make Anyone Safer:

<https://truthout.org/articles/locking-up-drug-dealers-to-save-users-doesnt-make-anyone-safer/>

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2015/08/federal-drug-sentencing-laws-bring-high-cost-low-return>

The New England Journal of Medicine:

<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmsa064115>

Imprisonment, whether for drug or other offenses, actually leads to much higher risk of drug overdose upon release.

“During the first 2 weeks after release, the risk of death among former inmates was 12.7 (95% CI, 9.2 to 17.4) times that among other state residents, with a markedly elevated relative risk of death from drug overdose (129; 95% CI, 89 to 186). The leading causes of death among former inmates were drug overdose, cardiovascular disease, homicide, and suicide.”

United Nations Chief Executives Board 2018) called all member states to “promote alternatives to conviction and punishment in appropriate cases, including the decriminalization of drug possession for personal use”

<https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/2018%20Nov%20-%20UN%20system%20common%20position%20on%20drug%20policy.pdf>

High Cost, Low Returns:

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2018/03/more-imprisonment-does-not-reduce-state-drug-problems>

Portugal::

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/29910/1/Hughes%20%20Stevens%202010.pdf>



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<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/What-Can-We-Learn-From-The-Portuguese-of-Illicit-Hu-ghes-Stevens/4ab0a481a65114f33667720d814b1c3f58ec6435>
<https://time.com/longform/portugal-drug-use-decriminalization/>

Czech Republic:

<https://fee.org/articles/locking-up-addicts-wont-fix-the-opiate-crisis/>

2023 Mass Incarceration #s:

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023.html>

ACLU Not research:

<https://www.aclu.org/other/against-drug-prohibition>