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Testimony of The Maine Municipal Association
In Unanimous Support For
LD 1857 - *An Act to Create the Public Safety Health and Wellness Reimbursement Fund to Benefit Public Safety Workers and Volunteers*
May 12, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Rebecca Graham and I'm here to provide testimony in strong support of this bill. LD 1857, *An Act to Create the Public Safety Health and Wellness Reimbursement Fund to Benefit Public Safety Workers and Volunteers*, was submitted by request from MMA's 70 member Legislative Policy Committee, and forms one their important platform bills to address recruitment and retention of vital public safety professionals in all sectors by providing a statewide benefit that transcends local or agency capacity which is a barrier to provide this for all employees, and volunteers.

The Association thanks Rep. Copeland and Sen. Bailey for working so diligently with us to address this issue and understand why it is important. We are deeply grateful for their work on this issue on behalf of their first responders and all their colleagues from Madawaska to York.

Everyone in the Legislature has consistently heard about the significant recruiting issues facing public safety in all sectors. For those who remain, long hours, order ins and mandatory overtime are the norm and burn out is looming. Our residents consistently reaffirm their appreciation, respect and gratitude for those who choose service to all and often in their worst moments in life.

It is for that reason MMA and municipal officials ask you to support LD 1857, our platform bill, to provide a tangible benefit to every single public safety employee, and volunteer.

The legislature has continually supported legal changes that recognize the expectations we place on these individuals when we employ them to deal with the worst situations humans experience on a daily basis. Those policy changes recognize that to be exposed to traumatic events takes a toll on the body and the mind. Thus, you have chosen to enact workers' compensation presumptions that establish when that toll catches up, the insurance will pay for a first responder's expensive medical bills and transition them out of service should they survive following a health event.

We owe them more than that. We owe them the much cheaper gift of prevention. Not only for their wellbeing but for our communities.

While workers' compensation coverage applies to all employees and volunteers, they do not all receive health benefits or even have access to pre-screening baseline testing necessary to establish the work impacts on health. Medical insurance does not cover such testing without an identified risk or issue. Until they are sick, their health risks are not captured.

By the nature of what the average first responder experiences, and our hiring practices, we also establish a distrust of mental health professionals who often lack the necessary cultural literacy to establish a rapport that would allow an individual to open up. The coping mechanisms often take the form of sharing with colleagues, whose skills set might also be lacking. Thus, poor coping skills are endemic in public safety, and opening up to a stranger, particularly one who has never experienced listening to someone die on the

phone while waiting for an ambulance to arrive or having them die in front of you on arrival. Culturally competent providers are few, but they are growing, and most national organizations are working hard to establish a network of known providers with positive tangible proof of the ability to build trusting relationships with specific first responder types.

And there is a difference.

While firefighters are equally a closed group who experience many of the same traumatic events that law enforcement experience, they are not forced to have a psychological exam upon hiring, mandatory fitness for duty evaluations following a use of force incident or the need to seek a review before being able to return to work—where the people who understand you best can be found. The act of being a party to a traumatic event can result in cutting you off from the same people you are most comfortable speaking with. The employer centered approach means you are less likely to have a relationship with a therapist that is positive, forward thinking or without the perception that disclosure may be endangering your career.

This bill allows an individual to start that relationship with a culturally competent provider before such an event occurs and solidifies that nothing about that relationship is disclosed to the employer, except that have attended or not should that agency choose to mandate them. That relationship is voluntary with the provider, and once established can connect an individual to other services such as therapy for the family unit who also experience adjacent trauma from the toll of tragedies their first responder spouses, partners and children face.

These are not services covered by most health insurance.

Firefighters are exposed to carcinogens and hazardous substances in their most volatile state for long hours and with gear that may be dependent on your volunteer association's ability to afford it new. However, when a significant structural fire occurs, frequently it cannot be extinguished without the help of adjacent communities and volunteer serves. Volunteers may be carrying their own high deductible health insurance as a contractor or on a spouse's private health insurance through another employer. No insurance pays for the baseline testing to monitor an individual for cancer until they present signs, which can often be too late to eradicate.

The cardiac risk to first responder in all groups is significantly higher than the general population and on average first responders live shorter lives and have earlier on set cardiac issues, that if caught early, can be prevented entirely. Those screenings, like the cancer baseline assessments are not covered until another symptom presents.

This bill asks the legislature to connect the head and the heart in wholistic health screening and services available to all first responders... police, fire, EMS, corrections and dispatchers.

Some communities have access to forward thinking leaders who push for programs to offer their staff to address these issues. They have started these programs and at least one of those individuals is in the room with you. But not all communities can afford this added benefit even with supportive elected leaders. All public safety personnel deserve this uniformly, as towns are in a cycle of trading professionals between state, county and municipal budgets. We need a way to attract volunteers who may receive only the benefit of serving their community in small rural associations with no alternatives.

We are asking you to use the growing pot of adult use cannabis revenue to level that playing field for all public safety professionals. Every single first responder, regardless of how their department is structured,

or employment status, face the same repeated traumatic events, are exposed to the same toxic carcinogens and incur the same exposure to trauma that causes lifelong cardiac health risks.

This benefit will be available to them regardless of future regionalization efforts, or disintegration of an agency because it will be available to all agencies in whatever form going forward. It also has the power to inspire health and wellness professionals to specialize in Maine adding to the needs of the general population as well.

For all these reasons, we ask that you support LD 1857, and review the submitted testimony from public safety professionals, practitioners, and those with lived experience both in the room, via zoom and through written testimony.

Thank you for your consideration. I will be happy to bring back any additional information for the work session and encourage you to consider bringing some of the practitioners you hear from today and in your testimony list for detailed answers from the health perspective on why this is so important. I have also submitted some available resources on a national level for you to consider in that review and know you will receive many more from individuals who follow me.

Select Resources:

An Occupational Risk: What Every Police Agency Should Do To Prevent Suicide Among Its Officers
<https://www.policeforum.org/assets/PreventOfficerSuicide.pdf>

MENTAL HEALTH: OFFICER WELLNESS
<https://www.sheriffs.org/Mental-Health-Officer-Wellness/>

Sigma Tactical Wellness Program
<https://iamsigma.com/program/>

[Approved Provider Bulletin \(APB\) - Fraternal Order of Police \(fop.net\)](#)

[COPS Office: Grants and Resources for Community Policing \(usdoj.gov\)](#)

[OfficerWellnessSurvey.pdf \(fop.net\)](#)

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS
WELLNESS-FITNESS INITIATIVE (WFI) RESOURCE
<https://www.iaff.org/wellness-fitness/wfi-resource/>

The IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery
<https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/>