

POSITION STATEMENT IN SUPPORT

LD 1857, An Act to Create the Public Safety Health and Wellness Reimbursement Fund to Benefit Public Safety Workers and Volunteers

Presented to Maine's Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

As the state's largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization, NAMI Maine supports the passage of *An Act to Create the Public Safety Health and Wellness Reimbursement Fund to Benefit Public Safety Workers and Volunteers*. Public Safety is called to respond largely to individuals who are experiencing their worst days or toughest experiences in their lives. While many of us go to work with the potential of stress, law enforcement and other first responders know they will only be called upon if someone requires their assistance for safety or acute stress.

The average individual will experience 2-3 critical or traumatic incidents during their lifetime, often involving law enforcement presences or responses. However, law enforcement will experience 168-170 incidents of critical or traumatic stress throughout the course of their career. Due to this, first responders are classified as the highest risk population for suicide death, higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and substance use disorders. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has found that public safety is 54% more likely to die of suicide than the general population. Associated with these challenges, officers experience high rates of divorce, struggles to maintain their career longevity, retention concerns in the profession, as well as multiple medical concerns such as high rates of cancer and cardiovascular disease. The National Institute for Health (NIH) research found that because of the multi-layered stress of public safety work, they are listed as having the worst cardiovascular health of any profession. The National Institute of Health also reported that as an impact of the work, the life expectancy of public safety workers is 21 years less than the general population.

NAMI Maine has the privilege of working with the public safety population. As a result of the partnerships that have been established, peer support teams are growing across the state. There have been training and initiatives that have increased access to clinicians and mental health providers who have training and understanding of the unique aspects of public safety culture. However, nationally and in the State of Maine, we continue to lose more public safety to suicide than line of duty deaths. Federal Legislation has acknowledged the acute risks in passing the Hometown Hero Act in 2003, recognizing cardiovascular disease related deaths as line of duty. Federal precedent was also set in 2022, recognizing that suicide deaths because of work-related Posttraumatic Stress is also a line of duty death. Here in Maine, there is the presumption of eligibility for workers compensation for public safety workers diagnosed with posttraumatic stress.

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There are national best practice models of treatment that are utilized with public safety, however often time funding restricts access to development and maintaining of these resources. Limited access to providers and appropriate insurance coverage is also restrictive. This committee is in the position to provide critical support and resources to those who are willing to sacrifice so much for our communities. This committee would also send the clear message that the health and wellbeing of our public servants is imperative to provide the best possible outcomes for the service of our state. Occupational Health Services has directly linked wellness and safety in the workplace, resulting in overall community safety. As other committees have recognized the importance of ensuring access to Critical Incident Stress Management, combatting the stigma associated with public safety of seeking assistance, this committee is in the position to proactively provide necessary resources and supports through critical funding and therefore NAMI Maine strongly supports the passage of LD 1857.

ABOUT NAMI MAINE: *Incorporated in 1984, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maine Chapter (NAMI Maine) is the state's largest grassroots mental health organization. With support from national and regional affiliates, the agency is dedicated to building better lives for everyone impacted by behavioral health concerns. NAMI Maine engages with leaders and community partners at all levels to improve the state's mental health system through collaboration and education.*

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