

Maine Law Enforcement Coalition

**Maine Law Enforcement Association – Maine Association of Police – Maine State Troopers Association –
Maine Lodge-Fraternal Order of Police**

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Service Hearing Testimony
By Paul Gaspar, Maine Law Enforcement Coalition
LD 1857 " An Act to Create the Public Safety Health and Wellness Reimbursement Fund to Benefit
Public Safety Workers and Volunteers"
May 22nd, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Paul Gaspar and I am from South Portland. I am proud to be before you this morning on behalf of the Maine Law Enforcement Coalition. The Coalition, and its member organizations, represents about 3,000 state, county, and municipal law enforcement officers and public safety dispatchers throughout Maine.

On behalf of the Coalition, its partner organizations and combined memberships throughout the state of Maine, I am here to offer our support for LD 1857 " An Act to Create the Public Safety Health and Wellness Reimbursement Fund to Benefit Public Safety Workers and Volunteers"

LD 1857 comes at a time when nationally, first responders are at a crossroads. Maine is not immune to this phenomenon. It is endemic in its scope and portends a looming crisis we are already experiencing in its formative stages. This bill and its shift in policy will provide the crucial base to a much-needed effort to address first responder wellness and its tangential effect on current responders, as well as their future iterations.

First responders of all walks; (law enforcement, fire service, EMS, health care, corrections, dispatchers, etc.) have been asked to stand the line time after time through multiple crises that have an immediate effect on the safety, health and wellbeing of our communities. Overt violence, opioid addiction, homelessness, burgeoning crime, pandemic, are just a few things that Maine's first responders have been asked to address. Caught between their own health and the health of their families, first responders have been asked to hold the line and the promise of their oaths; very much being caught between the hypocrisy of policy and politics they are asked to advance, and those who are affected by it. All the while, they are also asked to forego their own beliefs, convictions and sensibilities in the process.

For those committed individuals who place themselves in harm's way in these professions, they have borne the brunt of being asked to do the impossible; all with less resources, staffing, support and recognition of the effects these have had on our weary and beleaguered first responders.

These effects have taken their toll; insidiously and over time to bring us to present day. Across the board, first responders are experiencing exponential increases in stress, anxiety, doubt and trauma. In a segment of professions that continues to lag behind in recognizing and addressing the threats that long term exposure to these things, there is still very much a stigma and ignorance displayed by municipalities and their administrators in properly reaching out to employees in hidden crisis and the

ancillary health and performance issues that build cumulatively over a career and often mistaken for solely a disciplinary and punitive response.

In a word; we are FAILING our first responders. LD 1857 provides an opportunity to not only bring all manners of stakeholders to a common understanding of the importance of first responder wellness. An understanding that fosters proactive and cooperative efforts that are not constrained to a single explanation or response with finite number or types of treatments. With a better understanding of the immediate, interim and long-term effects of first responders' mental health, it will shed even more light on the related physical effects that have plagued them for decades.

Tangible health issues such as cardiac health, hypertension, insomnia, hopelessness, digestive issues have all been medically tied to a first responders emotional and mental health. This then leads to other matters for which they are then erroneously punished for such as work performance issues, substance use, divorce and fractured familial connections. These punitive actions only serve to drive responders who are suffering, not only underground and resistant to reach out for help, ultimately driving them to turn to the most drastic actions to release their pain; starting with self-harming behavior and suicide.

This committee has an opportunity today to take the first, common sense, steps in extending a positive policy shift in providing an overdue lifeline to those who protect us all. In codifying a common and needs based response to first responders, you extend a lifeline to those in crisis. Crisis that exists already in a group of professions such as law enforcement which has one of the highest rates of alcoholism, divorce and a suicide rate that has now surpassed the number of those actually killed in the line of duty.

Maine's first responders, all who have fulfilled all the herculean tasks you have asked, now ask for your recognition and support. On behalf of the Maine Law enforcement Coalition, we implore you to answer their call and vote ought to pass on this critical policy, unified response and financial support that it provides for the very real effects of the tolls their service has wrought on them.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul D. Gaspar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Paul D. Gaspar
Executive Director, Maine Association of Police
Maine Law Enforcement Coalition