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131st Legislature

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**Testimony of Senator Chip Curry introducing
LD 1120, "Resolve, to Install a Suicide Barrier on the Penobscot Narrows Bridge"**
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation
April 4, 2023

Senator Chipman, Representative Williams, and distinguished colleagues of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation, I am Senator Chip Curry, and I represent the 26 rural, coastal, and island communities of Waldo County. Today I present to you LD 1120, "Resolve, to Install a Suicide Barrier on the Penobscot Narrows Bridge."

The Penobscot Narrows Bridge, which connects Verona Island and the Town of Prospect, has been the site of numerous deaths by suicide since it opened in 2006^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}. I believe we must act swiftly to prevent further predictable tragedies from occurring at this bridge. This resolve directs the Department of Transportation (DOT) to construct and maintain barriers on the bridge for the purpose of suicide prevention and requires the department to report on its progress every six months until the installation of the barrier is complete.

The Penobscot Narrows Bridge is a marvel of engineering, a symbol of our state's progress, and a vital connection between communities. However, its height of 447 feet and the lack of effective safety barriers have made it a dangerous location for those struggling with suicidal ideations¹⁴. The emergency phones installed on the bridge have proven insufficient in addressing this issue, with some past instances of non-functionality and limited effectiveness^{2, 4}.

Countless studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of barrier fencing in preventing suicides. A fundamental aspect of why these barriers work is their ability to create a crucial delay, allowing time for individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts to reconsider their actions and for others to intervene¹⁰. I wish to repeat that. A key factor in preventing death from suicide is to create a distance in time from the suicidal thought to the lethal action. In the case of the Penobscot Narrows Bridge, we have failed to design for the delay between the thought and the lethal action.

Research has consistently shown that barriers are more effective than alternative methods, such as signage or telephone hotlines, in reducing suicide rates at bridges and other high-risk locations¹¹. In fact, one notable study out of Switzerland revealed that the implementation of barriers led to a significant 86% reduction in suicides at publicly accessible heights¹².

Moreover, it has been found that individuals who are prevented from employing one method of suicide generally do not seek alternative means. That same Swiss study, discovered that after being deterred by a barrier, a majority of individuals would not choose another place to jump from¹².

We've already seen proof of these barriers working here in Maine. Following a rise in suicides at Augusta's Memorial Bridge, a barrier was installed to halt these tragic deaths. No suicides have been reported at the Memorial Bridge since. A 2005 study revealed that not only was the barrier effective in preventing suicides, but there was also no observable increase in attempts at other sites across the state during the research period. As a result, the barrier continues to serve as a successful measure in deterring suicide deaths¹³.

In past legislatures, there have been numerous attempts to build a barrier on the Penobscot Narrows Bridge. Tragically, none have been successful due to a few concerns I'd like to address.

It is true that there will be an initial financial investment required to implement such a barrier, but the long-term benefits of saving lives and preventing the emotional impact on friends, families, and communities far outweigh the upfront costs. Moreover, certain studies have shown that the costs of implementing suicide prevention barriers are often offset by the resulting decrease in expenses related to emergency response, health care, and economic productivity loss¹⁵. Investing in a suicide barrier is not only a moral imperative but also a fiscally responsible decision.

I have had conversations with DOT representatives to better understand what prevention measures they have taken and are currently working on. While it is commendable that the department is taking action, the evidence cited in this testimony strongly suggests that barriers are the most effective means of suicide prevention at high-risk locations like the Penobscot Narrows Bridge.

We do not need to "own" every tragedy that occurs in our state. But in this case, we do literally own it. We designed the bridge and built it. We constructed the railing for the safety of cars but ignored the risks to people experiencing the temporary and often fleeting thoughts of ending their lives. Now that we know that it has become a suicide hotspot, we have a duty to act. In the same way, if we discovered 1 to 2 fatalities a year occurred at the same intersection, or the same 650-yard stretch of road, we would be compelled to act.

Installing a barrier on the Penobscot Narrows Bridge would be a well-supported, evidence-based approach to protecting the lives of our community members and reducing the number of suicides. By taking this action, we are demonstrating our commitment to the safety and well-being of Mainers. I urge you to join me and my cosponsors, which include all of the elected legislators that border this bridge, and support this life-saving legislation.

In closing, I'd like to recognize these are very hard discussions and I want to remind folks, both in the room and watching via livestream, that there is help if you are considering suicide. Please reach out. You can call or text the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.

Senator Chipman, Representative Williams and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation thank you for your consideration of this bill, and I'd welcome any questions you might have.

Sincerely,



Chip Curry

State Senator, District 11

Representing the 26 rural, coastal, and island communities of Waldo County

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