

**Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH**

**IN SUPPORT OF LD 1975**

**An Act to Implement a Statewide Public Health Response to Substance Use and Amend the Laws Governing Scheduled Drugs**

Presented by Representative Lydia Crafts

**Before the Health and Human Services Committee, January 17, 2024**

My name is Lani Graham. I am a Family Practice physician and a former Chief Public health Officer for Maine. I live in Freeport. I am honored to support this beautifully named bill.

I am going to keep it simple. A public health approach is exactly what this pandemic has needed for many years. This means treating people who are ill with substance use disorders as patients needing services and not as criminals needing jail time.

Current Maine law has the effect of treating people ill with substance use disorders as criminally responsible for their illnesses by finding them guilty of a felony for simply possessing drugs that they have become addicted to. This is akin to arresting an alcoholic and charging him or her with a felony for possessing bottles of alcohol. While this state and country had a brief fling with doing just that, it didn't take long to realize that the problem of alcoholism wasn't going to be solved through the criminal justice system.

Addiction is a hard illness to treat successfully. It is not about in-patient care, but careful, consistent follow-up and support, usually over many years. Unfortunately, such treatment and follow up becomes nearly impossible once someone has a felony conviction. Going from community to prison and back

to community is no way to begin the long road to health for an ill person.

Anyone who has a substance use disorder must be a partner in his or her own care. Making that commitment is much more likely to happen in a humane environment that encourages participation but does not try to force it. I have worked with many people suffering with addictions. Statistics show that the average number of times that a smoker is offered treatment before it is accepted is about 6. Acceptance is the key in a supportive medical environment.

This bill takes a public health approach by:

- Ceasing to treat ill people as criminals.
- Assuring dedicated funding for needed medical treatment.
- Making treatment services available statewide
- Assuring that there is oversight of the services and treatment.
- Collecting necessary data so that progress can be measured.

I urge the Committee to support LD 1975 unanimously ought to pass.

Thank you for your attention.

