

Testimony of Doug Dunbar from Hermon, Maine

In Support of LD 1975

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

January 17, 2024

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Doug Dunbar. I live in Hermon, a portion of my friend Joe Baldacci's Senate district. This testimony is offered in strong support of LD 1975 and in recognition of the overdue need to finally *treat substance use disorder (SUD) as a health matter* in need of understanding and care, rather than a moral failure requiring condemnation and punishment.

Thank you to Representative Crafts for demonstrating leadership and vision in sponsoring this significant piece of legislation. Thank you also to Senator Hickman and a bipartisan group of legislators for joining as cosponsors. Appreciation should additionally be expressed to the health care providers and others with expertise in SUD who support LD 1975.

In many instances, our laws take far too long time to catch up with science and research. That's been the case with how we view and address SUD—now understood and accepted to be a form of mental illness. Changes in the brain occur in people, like me, who have experienced SUD. In my case, alcohol use disorder had a profound impact on how I thought, felt and acted.

During my time as the press secretary for John Baldacci in Congress and the Governor's office, and then while serving as Maine's Chief Deputy Secretary of State, I concealed mental health disorders (OCD and anxiety) and my addiction to alcohol because of the stigma and judgement our society focuses on individuals suffering from those illnesses.

My career in government ended when my diseases contributed to poor decision-making and several months in jail. If you haven't benefitted from the enlightening experience of being incarcerated, I recommend it. Every legislator, judge, attorney and anyone else with a connection to our criminal legal system should spend two weeks in multiple jails and prisons. If that occurred, you would trip over each other racing back to the Revisors Office to submit legislation seeking substantial reform.

What you'd realize while in jail is the harm it causes. Jails, by their nature, are incompatible with wellness. They should never be viewed as a place for people to recover. There are certainly cases in which jail changes the trajectory of a life for the better, but in general, incarceration is harmful. It is well-established that individuals with a mental health disorder languish longer in our jails than others, their conditions typically worsen, and they're more likely to be the victim of abuse.

If we genuinely believe in helping people and safeguarding the public, we need to significantly reform our criminal legal system and how we address the underlying reasons for a significant majority of incarcerations. That means a substantial change in how we deal with SUD and the possession of substances. *What we've been doing has been wrong and a failure.* It's been anti-science and contrary to best practices.

We have failed. Those are words we seldom say, particularly in government. But it's essential to recognize that what we've been doing hasn't worked. In fact, it's been destructive. Investing hundreds of millions of dollars year after year in places to hold and often mistreat people who are ill, rather than making the appropriate level of investments in treatment for SUD and co-occurring disorders, has truly been a moral failure.

LD 1975 will acknowledge the research and science. It will prioritize health over punishment. It will move our laws and society away from stigma toward understanding. It will help more people to get well. It will address root causes of incarcerations. It will enhance public safety. It deserves your support. Thank you.