

January 17, 2024

Dear Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Respected Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Lauren Porter, a Maine-certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor who specializes in substance use and drug policy. As a student member of their board of directors, I represent the National Association of Social Workers Maine Chapter (NASW ME) in favor of LD 1975. This bill offers us an opportunity to save lives through evidenced-based approaches and to align Maine's drug policies with the global movement towards a public health approach to drugs, and the social work values of social equity and justice.

Social workers are responsible for addressing challenges threatening the well-being and the ability of individuals, communities, and society to reach their full potential, with particular attention to marginalized and oppressed groups. We are guided by a commitment to social justice, a principle that is vehemently opposed to racial disparities and marginalization perpetuated by our current drug policies.

Maine's battle with the opioid crisis has been devastatingly profound. The state has witnessed not only a significant rise in opioid-related challenges but also stark racial disparities in drug arrests and incarceration (Popp, 2023). Research consistently illustrates that the War on Drugs and the criminalization framework that guides our current drug policies have failed to bring positive outcomes. On the contrary, it has deepened injustices by launching an era of mass incarceration. Far too many individuals have died, and far too many communities have been destroyed, calling for an urgent reevaluation of our approach to drug policy.

The first part of this legislation commits to a significant increase in funds for substance use disorder treatment and related services across Maine, shifting to a supportive, health-centered model that includes mental health care, peer support, and harm reduction. While a majority of substance use is not problematic, our current policies disproportionately focus on punitive measures, draining resources that could otherwise enhance treatment services for those in need.

The second component of LD 1975 removes criminal penalties for small amounts of drug possession. This is not an endorsement of drug use. It is a pragmatic approach that acknowledges the limitations and harmful consequences of a purely punitive system for drug possession, which has bound up our legal system, overburdened our prison system, and robbed many of our youth of their lives and futures. Far too many individuals have died, and far too many communities have been destroyed.

Decriminalizing drug possession can significantly reduce the burden on legal and correctional systems, reallocate resources for programs that reduce harm, promote recovery, and address the root causes of substance use disorders. Oregon and Washington's move towards decriminalization and expanded resources to treatment has shown positive signs, including a significant reduction in arrests for possession, decreased felony arrests, and more funds going to substance use services. reducing fatal drug overdoses (Joshi, 2023). Linking increased treatment resources with decriminalization is pivotal for successfully mitigating the lifelong physical, mental, social, and financial effects of incarceration for drug possession.

In a 2016 Resolution, the United Nations General Assembly called for "effective measures aimed at minimizing the adverse public health and social consequences" of substance use disorders (United Nations, 2016, p. 6). This resolution reflects the growing global consensus on the need for balanced, health-focused drug policies.

By adopting this bill, Maine has the potential to learn from and improve the already successful models. It offers a chance to prioritize treatment and support over criminalization, focusing our resources that are most needed and most likely to significantly impact individuals and communities. This legislation represents a vital step towards aligning Maine's drug policies with social work ethics, public health principles, and the broader global movement toward more effective, humane approaches to drug policy. It offers a chance to mitigate the harms of the opioid crisis, address racial disparities, and refocus our resources on meaningful support and treatment.

NASW Maine strongly urges you to support this bill as a commitment to the well-being and dignity of all individuals in Maine. Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Lauren Porter, BSW, CADC, MHRT/C  
MSW Student Representative  
Board of Directors, NASW ME

Julie Schirmer, LCSW, ACSW  
President of the Board of Directors  
NASW ME

References:

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