

POSITION STATEMENT IN SUPPORT**LD 444, An Act to Designate First Responders and Other Public Safety Professionals as a Special Risk Population for the Purposes of Improving Insurance Coverage for the Effects of Trauma Presented to Maine's Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services**

As the state's largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization, NAMI Maine supports the passage of *An Act to Designate First Responders and Other Public Safety Professionals as a Special Risk Population for the Purposes of Improving Insurance Coverage for Effects of Trauma*. Public Safety is called to respond largely to individuals who are experiencing their worst days or toughest experiences in their lives. While many of us go to work with the potential of stress, law enforcement and other first responders know they will only be called upon if someone requires their assistance for safety or acute stress.

While many of us will experience 2-3 critical or traumatic incidents during the course of their lifetime, often times involving law enforcement presences or response. However, law enforcement will experience 168-170 critical or traumatic stress throughout the course of their career. Due to this, first responders are classified as the highest risk population for suicide death, higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and substance use disorders. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has found that public safety is 54% more likely to die of suicide than the general population. The results of these challenges often lead to officers experiencing high rates of divorce, struggles to maintain their career longevity, retention concerns in the profession, as well as multiple medical concerns such as higher rates of cancer and cardiovascular disease than their civilian counterparts. The National Institute for Health (NIH) research found that as a result of the multi-layered stress of public safety work, they are listed as having the worst cardiovascular health of any profession. The National Institute of Health also reported that as an impact of the work, the life expectancy of public safety workers is 21 years less than the general population.

NAMI Maine has had the privilege of working with the public safety population. As a result of the partnerships that have been established, peer support teams are growing across the state. There have been training and initiatives that have increased access to clinicians and mental health providers who have training and understanding of the unique aspects of public safety culture. However, nationally and in the State of Maine, we continue to lose more public safety to suicide than line of duty deaths. Federal Legislation has acknowledged the acute risks in passing the Hometown Hero Act in 2003, recognizing cardiovascular disease related deaths as line of duty. Federal precedent was also set in 2022, recognizing that suicide deaths as a result of work-related Posttraumatic Stress is also a line of duty death. Here in Maine, there is the presumption of eligibility for workers compensation for public safety workers diagnosed with posttraumatic stress, as well as the designation that suicide is considered a line of duty death. Due to many barriers, including insurance coverage and financial concerns, first responders are

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hesitant to seek treatment. By this committee supporting legislation acknowledging and easing obstacles the path, it will continue to move forward treatment and access to resources that can save lives by both physical and mental health services.

This committee is in the position to provide critical support and resources to those who are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for our communities. This committee would also send the clear message that the health and wellbeing of our public servants is imperative in order to provide the best possible outcomes for the service of our state. Following the events in Lewiston, the courage and bravery that our first responders demonstrate was on display for all to witness. Acknowledging the impact of that event, among countless others, and reducing the hurdles they face when seeking treatment will further reinforce the support that they deserve.

ABOUT NAMI MAINE: *Incorporated in 1984, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maine Chapter (NAMI Maine) is the state's largest grassroots mental health organization. With support from national and regional affiliates, the agency is dedicated to building better lives for everyone impacted by behavioral health concerns. NAMI Maine engages with leaders and community partners at all levels to improve the state's mental health system through collaboration and education.*

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