

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

**LD 2237 - Ought to Pass**

**An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health and Well-being by  
Expanding Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention  
Resources**

Joint Standing Committee  
on Health and Human Services

March 4, 2024

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, good morning. My name is Michael Kebede and I am Policy Counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support LD 2237 because it would help fix our shambolic mental and behavioral health system, reducing our reliance on jails and police to address health crises.

Maine ranks ninth worst in the nation for prevalence of mental illnesses,<sup>1</sup> twentieth worst for adults with a mental illness who did not receive treatment, and ninth worst for adults with mental illness who are uninsured.<sup>2</sup> Maine's underinvestment in its continuum of care has left police to serve as the first responders to mental and behavioral health crises, and county jails as psychiatric treatment centers of last resort.<sup>3</sup>

This has meant many preventable lethal encounters between police and people going through a crisis. To read the Maine Attorney General's Deadly Force Review Panel reports is to read story after story of the state killing someone going through a mental or behavioral crisis.<sup>4</sup> If Maine had invested heavily in its mental

---

<sup>1</sup> Reinert, M, Fritze, D. & Nguyen, T. (October 2022). "*The State of Mental Health in America 2023*" *Mental Health America*, Alexandria VA., at 13, available at <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/2023-State-of-Mental-Health-in-America-Report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 21.

<sup>3</sup> Nok-Noi Ricker, *From hospitals to jails: How Maine's mentally ill are still institutionalized*, WGME, Feb. 22, 2016, available at <https://wgme.com/news/local/from-hospitals-to-jails-how-maines-mentally-ill-are-still-institutionalized>.

<sup>4</sup> Available here: <https://www.maine.gov/ag/news/index.shtml>

health infrastructure, perhaps there would have been fewer deaths, and fewer people in jail.

It is too late for those whose lives the state has taken. But it is not too late to prevent more deaths. If enacted, LD 2237 would invest \$2.5 million in mental health crisis intervention mobile response services; \$9 million to establish six new mental health crisis receiving centers, one each in Androscoggin, Aroostook, Oxford, Penobscot, Washington and York counties; and \$6 million to expand access to medication management services provided by the Office of Behavioral Health, including telehealth services and employee recruitment and retention services.

This bill would also establish an Office of Violence Prevention in the Maine CDC to “coordinate and promote effective efforts to reduce violence in the state, including, but not limited to, gun violence and related trauma and promote research about causes and evidenced based responses to such violence”; a “Gun Shop Project” in the Department of Public Safety, in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services, to develop, create and distribute written suicide prevention education materials and an online training course; require the commissioner of public safety to develop and implement a process for notifying the public of active shooter situations; and require the commissioner to study the creation and implementation of a process to notify federally licensed firearm dealers in the state about people deemed to be dangerous or in a mental health crisis.

The historic investments of this bill will save lives. This bill will save not just the lives of those going through a health crisis, but also the lives of bystanders, like those we lost in Lewiston on October 25 last year. It will help shrink our jails; it will strengthen Maine peoples’ rights to life, liberty, and freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures. We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.