



March 4, 2024

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is John Hennessy. I am the Public Advocacy Director for the Episcopal Diocese of Maine and I also serve as the co-chair of the public policy committee of the Maine Council of Churches, a coalition of seven mainline Protestant denominations who have more than 400 local churches with over 50,000 parishioners in their care. On behalf of both organizations, I offer this testimony in support of LD 2237 – An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health and Well-being by Expanding Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention Resources.

The Episcopal Church recognizes the worldwide prevalence of mental illness and the need for effective, compassionate, inclusive, and competent treatment for people facing mental health challenges in Maine. Faith and community leaders are often the first point of contact when individuals and families face mental health problems or traumatic events. In fact, in times of crisis, many will turn to trusted leaders in their communities before they turn to mental health professionals.

Our friends at NAMI report there is a divide between faith and mental health — with mental illness being viewed as a moral or spiritual failing and spirituality being viewed as unscientific. Faith and mental health are not antithetical to each other; in fact, they are complementary. After all, if mental health is health, and we believe that it is, that includes our whole health — our physical health, our mental health, and our spiritual health.

Even prior to the pandemic, mental health challenges as well as mental illness have constituted significant health problems. Mental health is a public health matter that impacts quality of life for people with mental health problems and their families and friends. Stigmatization of mental illness has persisted, leading to shame-based and fear-based avoidance of admission and discussion of the mental health challenges that people experience.

The bill in front of you is an important step to improve mental health crisis response services and to reduce violence, including gun violence. In our baptismal vows, we promise to respect the dignity of every human person and to seek and serve Christ in all people. Our country is torn by divisiveness, and

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we are intrigued by the possibilities of the new Office of Violence Prevention to reduce violence in Maine.

Mental health professionals know that where there is hate, there is fear, fear born from misinformation and stereotypes. Individuals and families, within our communion, continue to suffer silently with the fall-out of mental illness. The existence of mental illness may not become known to pastoral care ministries in our congregations until a terrible crisis occurs involving law enforcement and or suicide.

But Jesus brings relief and release from all shame and stigma. Jesus proclaimed, "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). As Emmanuel, God-with- us, Jesus communicated that God wants all humans to thrive. Jesus' ministry was summarized in the words he read from Isaiah in the synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (from Luke 4:18-19).

There is a growing recognition that building partnerships between faith-based organizations and the behavioral health system can benefit those with mental health conditions. We look forward to the passage of this bill and the possibility of working together to help heal our state.

<https://www.episcopalhealth.org/enews/see-how-mental-health-first-aid/>