



**Testimony of
Michael R. Scott, President
Professional Fire Fighters of Maine**

LD 2224

“An Act to Strengthen Public Safety by Improving Maine's Firearm Laws and Mental Health System”

Wednesday, March 20th, 2024

Senator Carney & Representative Moonen and distinguished members of Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. Thank you for providing the PFFMaine with this opportunity today to voice our concerns regarding LD 2224 “An Act to Strengthen Public Safety by Improving Maine's Firearm Laws and Mental Health System”.

My name is Michael Scott, and I am the President of the Professional Fire Fighters of Maine. I am representing the views of our Executive Board and over 1,200 Professional Firefighters, Paramedics, EMTs & Dispatchers.

PFFMaine has been actively involved in improving the health & safety of first responders for more than 75 years. Part of that work has been focusing on behavioral health and reducing the stigma attached to it. We have been able to make advancements in reducing the stigma and getting our members to seek treatment. Unfortunately, LD 2224's revisions to the current yellow flag law is what causes us to raise our concerns to this Committee.

Our concerns with the current version of LD 2224 are as follows:

1. LD 2224 will exacerbate the stigma surrounding mental illness among our members. Connecting gun possession with mental illness can unfairly label all individuals with mental health conditions as potentially dangerous or violent, further stigmatizing an already marginalized population. This legislation may deter First Responders and individuals with mental health concerns from seeking treatment or support, as they may fear being stripped of their rights to own a firearm. This could ultimately have negative consequences for public safety, as individuals may be less likely to seek help and potentially address any underlying mental health issues.

2. A high percentage of our members legally possess firearms/dangerous weapons. If they believe that seeking treatment for a behavioral health disorder may cause them to temporarily lose their weapons, we believe that, in and of itself may discourage some of our members from seeking help. That is the last thing that we want to happen. We've been telling our members that, "it's ok, to not be ok". The possibility of having to surrender their weapons leaves them with the belief that it's not ok, to not be ok.
3. Another concern that has been discussed would be the position that health care providers are being placed in. Health care providers are there to provide the best treatment for their patients. To do that, there needs to be a relationship between the patient and the provider. If the patient believes that the provider will be determining the ability of that patient to keep their weapons or not, what kind of relationship will that build?
4. Overall, we are concerned with LD 2224 as it has the potential to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and hinder individuals from accessing the support and resources, they need to maintain their mental health and well-being.

In closing, being diagnosed with a behavioral health disorder does not inherently mean that a person is violent or should not possess firearms. Mental illness and violence are not directly correlated, and the vast majority of individuals with mental health issues are not violent.

It is important to consider each individual case separately and assess the individual's specific circumstances, rather than making broad assumptions based on a psychiatric diagnosis. Restrictions on firearm possession should be evidence-based and address specific risk factors, rather than simply targeting individuals with mental health conditions as LD 2224 may allow for.

Taking away someone's firearms solely based on a mental health diagnosis can perpetuate stigma and discrimination against individuals with mental illness. It is crucial to consider factors such as the individual's history of violence, access to appropriate mental health treatment, and other risk factors when making decisions about firearm possession. Overall, it is important to approach the issue of firearm possession and mental health with sensitivity, evidence-based practices, and a focus on individualized assessment and support.

Although our organization may not typically get involved in issues related to firearms, as our primary focus is on representing the interests of our first responders. Nonetheless, it is important for our organization to address concerns that directly impact the well-being and safety of our members.

Given the potential implications of LD 2224 on the stigma surrounding mental illness and the potential impact on access to resources and support for individuals with behavioral health disorders, it makes sense for the PFFMaine to speak out on this issue. First responders often encounter individuals in crisis situations, including those with mental health concerns, and they play a critical role in ensuring the safety and well-being of the community.

By addressing the concerns raised by LD 2224 and advocating for evidence-based and thoughtful approaches to mental health and firearm possession, the PFFMaine can contribute to promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with mental health conditions and ensuring the safety and well-being of both the general public and their first responders.

If you have any questions, need additional information and/or see the need to discuss further, please feel free to reach out to my office anytime.

Thank you



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