

Testimony to the AFA & HHS Committees on LD: 210

By Kelly Cookson, Director of Save a Life Recovery Community Center, Enfield Resident

2/14/2025

Dear Senator Routundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Appropriations and Health and Human Services Committees,

My name is Kelly Cookson, and I have had the privilege of serving as the director of Save a Life for the past three years. I am also someone who has personally experienced the challenges of mental health and substance misuse, as well as seeing those struggles affect loved ones. It is from this personal and professional perspective that I speak today, urging you to reconsider how the proposed funding decisions could impact our mental health infrastructure.

I was deeply disappointed to learn that funding for two crisis receiving centers has been removed. As someone who works closely with individuals dealing with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, I see firsthand how essential these services are to the health and safety of our community. I was even more disheartened to hear that the proposed budget includes an increase in funding for law enforcement. The truth is, if we had the necessary funding for mental health care, we wouldn't have to rely so heavily on law enforcement or EMS in the first place.

In my community, the police and EMS are regularly called upon to respond to mental health crises—this is especially true since our mobile crisis unit has been largely inaccessible. From my experience, this system is not only ineffective but also harmful. Time and again, I have been involved in situations where people in the midst of a mental health crisis or drug-induced psychosis are met with responses that do not address their real needs. Our local law enforcement and EMS are not equipped with the expertise to handle these situations. The way I have seen some individuals have been treated in these instances has been nothing short of appalling.

Law enforcement officers and EMS personnel are not mental health specialists, and I don't believe that's what they signed up for when choosing their careers. Many of the individuals I work with have faced trauma from interactions with police and EMS, which often leaves them hesitant or resistant to future encounters with these same systems. This only deepens the cycle of mistrust and harm.

If we were to invest in more mental health crisis services, the burden on law enforcement could be greatly reduced. This would allow police officers to focus on situations where their expertise is needed, such as those involving criminal activity, rather than responding to individuals who are in distress or behaving in ways that are unsafe but not criminal. Many of the situations I've encountered could have been avoided altogether if appropriate mental health services had been available from the outset.

As a peer support specialist, I often find myself stepping in to bridge the gap, leveraging the relationships I've built to assist law enforcement and EMS in providing the right kind of support. However, peer support alone is not enough to meet the growing needs of our communities. We need the infrastructure, the funding, and the resources to ensure that individuals in crisis receive the care they need and deserve.

I urge you to consider the long-term benefits of investing in mental health services—both for the well-being of individuals and the safety of our communities. By directing funding toward crisis receiving

centers and mental health facilities, we can ensure that our resources are used effectively and compassionately, reducing the need for law enforcement and EMS intervention in situations that they are not trained to handle.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this important matter.

Kelly Cookson

Enfield Resident

Director

Save A Life Recovery Community Center, Lincoln ME

Director@salrecoverynetwork.org