



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Public Testimony of LD 461 – An Act to Fund Rural Patrol Services in Washington County

Presented by Representative Strout of Harrington – District 11

Good morning, Senator Beebe - Center, Representative Hasenfus and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee. I am Representative Tiffany Strout from Harrington, representing the towns of Milbridge, Harrington, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Centerville, Addison, Jonesport, Beals, Jonesboro, Roque Bluffs, Whitneyville and Machias and I am here today to provide testimony in support of LD 461 An Act to Fund Rural Patrol Services in Washington County.

Growing up in DownEast Maine was a wonderful opportunity to be with generations of my family and for the close-knit communities. There was crime, as there is anywhere, but there was a presence of police officers in the community and safety was not as much of a concern which, I believe to be contributed to the police presence. State Police Officers were often seen at sporting events, fundraisers, gas stations and on the roads. They were not always there for criminal calls, but rather to watch their children, support the community and get to know the residents. Many of the State Troopers were born and raised in Washington County. People knew officers were out and about and the response time when they were needed was a shorter response just due to where they were located at their headquarter base.

Over time there are many factors that change in a community which cause a fluctuation in population and crime rates including, economic contributors, housing shortages and education opportunities, but the major influx for Washington County is the drugs epidemic. Washington County has not only been infiltrated with out-of-state dealers, but Washington County was a major target for the opioid prescription crisis. Many of the jobs in Washington County are labor jobs with an increased chance for injury, things like lobster fishing, timber harvesting, clamming, worming, mechanic and such. An increase of the very addictive oxycodone prescription drugs opened up the opportunity for a surge in drug usage and sale of the products. This was brought to light by Senator Grohoski when testifying in favor of LD16, An Act to Establish Separate Prosecutorial District is DownEast Maine.

On February 22, 2022 a story was written by Maine Public with the headline **“Violence is the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of Washington County’s drug problem”** - <https://www.mainepublic.org/2022-02-22/violence-is-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-of-washington-countys-drug-problem> I have included the link to the full story, but here are some highlights:

- Four people have been killed in the past four months in Washington County, and though details about some of the cases have yet to be released, the county’s severe drug problem is largely being blamed for the violence.
- Ten people have been shot — six of them fatally — in the county in the past five years, and drugs have been cited by police as a factor in at least four of those shootings. In two of the four most recent shooting deaths, alleged drug dealers from out of state have been charged by police.
- Maine had more overdose deaths in 2021 than any other year, [surpassing 600](#) for the first time. Washington County accounted for 21 of those deaths — 7 percent of the state’s total
- “The drug trade is violent. There’s nothing rosy about it at all,” said Roy McKinney, director of Maine Drug Enforcement Agency. “There is an issue in Washington County. It does have challenges that are unique.”

District 11 Addison, Beals, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Harrington, Jonesboro, Jonesport, Machias, Milbridge, Roque Bluffs, Whitneyville, Centerville Township, and North Washington (Part)

- Washington County's violent crime rate was the second highest in Maine in 2020, with nearly 1.5 violent offenses for every 1,000 residents, according to the Maine Department of Public Safety. Androscoggin County, which has a population 3.5 times bigger than Washington County, has the highest rate in 2020 with roughly 1.8 violent offenses for every 1,000 residents.
- Of the recent violent shootings in Washington County, one that occurred last fall (2021) on a quiet residential street in Machias may be the starkest example of the county's drug woes. An alleged drug dealer from New York was targeted by rival drug dealers from Massachusetts, according to police. Brandin Guerrero, 17 of Massapequa, New York, had been sent to Machias to sell drugs but [was ambushed and gunned down](#) as he walked past a local cemetery on High Street.

These statistics highlight a need for a multifaceted approach to not only public safety but a healthy population. As noted, there is also a request for Washington County to have its own District Attorney to allow for fair timely prosecution. The demographics of Washington County make it difficult for not only response but funding. When 17.5% of the population are at or below the national poverty level of 12.5% of a given population, there is only so much money those who own property can pay in taxes that go towards funding or schools and the county operations and part of our taxes in Washington County also contribute to the state to support the State Police.

Washington County is a beautiful land mass of 3,255 square miles, with a population of approximately 31,555 people according to the most recent 2023 census. From the most western town of Steuben to the most northern town Danforth, the shortest travel time is 2 hr and 13 min and as you can imagine road and weather conditions may extend that time. There are currently 14 Deputies patrolling 24 hours a day which as you can also imagine becomes more difficult with violent crimes or multiple calls at the same time.

I want to thank the Washington County Sheriff's Department for all the work they do on a daily basis with the small amount of funding they are working with to cover the area that needs to be covered. This bill was not requested because of a poor job currently being done, but rather to highlight the need for additional support not only for the citizens but also the officers responding to the calls. Adding 4 State Troopers to assist with patrol and response will not be the end to crime, but it will help with making communities safe, faster response times and a possible growth in the economy so people will want to travel to Washington County because they know they are safe as they explore.

Thank you for your time today and I would be glad to answer any questions.

Sincerely,



Tiffany Strout
State Representative