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United Way
of Southern Maine



Good morning, Chair Ingwersen and Chair Meyer, and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Annika Moore, and I am the Advocacy Team Leader at Preble Street. Preble Street's mission is to empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty and to advocate for solutions to these issues.

Preble Street strongly opposes LD 219, An Act to Limit Hypodermic Apparatus Exchange Programs to a One-for-One Exchange, which would limit the needle exchange ratio. Many Maine cities and towns, especially Portland, have a significant opioid crisis that has led to a surge in overdose deaths and other related health issues. Every day, our staff supports individuals who have experienced the trauma of homelessness, and the challenges of substance use disorder. We know from research and our 50-year history as a social service agency that the proposed 1:1 exchange rate will lead to needles being reused and increase health risks among many community members, especially the most vulnerable.

When needles are reused, there is a substantial risk of transmitting bloodborne pathogens such as HIV, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. Sharing needles allows for the direct transfer of infected blood, which could lead to an outbreak of infections in an already vulnerable population. Many in our community will face these dangerous risks if the syringe exchange is changed to a 1:1 ratio. Instead of returning to out-of-date practices that will increase health risks for our community, The City of Portland should look to proven and effective harm-reduction approaches, like syringe buy-back programs, that have worked out-of-state and even in Maine. The City of Portland released its first report on its syringe buy-back program initiative this month. This program was implemented in the fall of 2024 and focused on the Bayside, East Bayside, and Parkside neighborhoods. One hundred fifty-six clients were enrolled in this program and received training on safe syringe collection. In the six weeks following the start of the program, there was a 58% increase in syringes collected overall (76,554 pre-program vs. 120,793 post-program), and program staff collected 76% fewer improperly disposed needles in the six weeks after program start up as compared to the six weeks before program startup (1,677 to 387), indicating a marked decrease in improper disposal.

These results show that by investing in harm reduction efforts, like the syringe buyback program, we can increase the safety of our entire community,

50 years of turning hunger and homelessness into opportunity and hope

increasing proper needle disposal and encouraging safe use practices. Amid this opioid crisis, we must focus our harm-reduction resources on addressing the root causes of substance use disorder. Instead of returning to the out-of-date practice such as a strict 1:1 syringe exchange ratio, more focus should be placed on outreach and educational programs on safely discarding used syringes and the critical health importance of obtaining new ones.

Preble Street urges you to reject this proposed 1:1 syringe exchange ratio and allow for a more flexible harm reduction approach based on individual needs and risk factors. The City of Portland's syringe buy-back program demonstrates that such programs are effective for individuals with substance use disorders and public safety.

Thank you for your time and consideration.