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Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and distinguished members of the joint standing committee on judiciary, my name is Sarah Young. I am a resident of Augusta, a proud member of the public health community, and I am testifying today in opposition to the bills before you.

I have forever and always been in support of allowing transgender youth to participate in the sport of their choosing. At its core, this issue is about inclusivity, freedom of expression, and creating a society where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

As a former athlete, sports are more than just a competition -- they are a celebration of teamwork, perseverance, and self-expression. By excluding transgender youth, specifically transgender girls and women, from participating, we not only deny them the opportunity to engage in these shared human experiences, but we also send a harmful message to young people everywhere: that being yourself is not acceptable.

Every athlete - every child - deserves the right to compete in an environment where they can express who they truly are, free from discrimination or fear.

Unfortunately, much of the debate around this issue has been clouded by fear mongering, misinformation, and an unfounded focus on transgender women as a so-called "threat" to those around them.

Quite frankly, as a child and teenager, I was bullied in the locker room by my cis-gendered peers. The girls in the locker room would look over the stalls to antagonize me while I changed, made fun of my undergarments, and caused my self esteem to falter. Throughout my many years of athletics, I was always nervous about changing in front of my other peers, because of the ruthless bullying from the girls in middle school. In contrast, the one transgender student (woman) in my school treated me with kindness, respect, and empathy. In my eyes, that holds far more value than the vile bullying from my cis-gendered peers.

This narrative around transgender women that has been pedaled by Fox News and the current administration in Washington is not only baseless but actively harmful, as it detracts from the real challenges facing our youth today.

As a certified health education specialist, a youth advisor, and a public health professional here in Maine, the true dangers to young people are not transgender athletes. They are gun violence, substance use, flavored tobacco, and the lack of mental health resources in schools to support them. Every single day, young lives are lost or irreparably harmed by these crises, yet instead of addressing these urgent issues, we are wasting time and resources debating the inclusion of a marginalized group in sports. It is THIS distraction that shifts our focus from protecting and supporting all young people, regardless of their gender identity.

We all want what's best for our communities. By embracing inclusivity, we strengthen our communities, set a positive example for future generations, and affirm the values of equality and freedom that are supposed to define us.

Let us focus our energy where it truly matters: on addressing the real issues that endanger youth and ensuring that every individual, no matter their identity, has the opportunity to thrive here in Maine.

Thank you.