



## Maine Municipal Association

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### Testimony of Maine Municipal Association

#### In Support For

*LD 405 -An Act to Prevent False Reporting Leading to Evacuation, Shutdown or Lockdown*

March 6, 2023

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Sen. Beebee-Center, Rep. Salisbury and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Rebecca Graham, and I providing testimony, in support of LD 405, *An Act to Prevent False Reporting Leading to Evacuation, Shutdown or Lockdown*, on behalf of the Maine Municipal Association, which represents the interests of municipal government before the Legislature. The positions of the Association are established by our 70-member Legislative Policy Committee (LPC), who are elected by the councils and selectboards of municipalities in each of Maine's 35 Senate districts.

Small communities across the state have been targeted by coordinated efforts using complex encrypted mail servers and communication platforms to generate fear and disrupt the daily lives of public officials, education institutions, and the enjoyment of civic society for Maine residents. These individuals willfully and intentionally exploit fear generated by national tragedies to close schools, evacuate students and target government, often for fun.

However, because of the same fears such individuals exploit, communities have no choice to but to respond as though a threat were real until it can be proven not to be. The cost of the public safety response can involve multiple agencies, across several jurisdictions, can be delayed in more rural areas, and places enormous strain on important services restricting their ability to attend to other legitimate emergencies. Only a portion of these calls have been reported publicly and false reports are increasing in number.

The cost and toll on public services and taxpayers is real and deserves repair when an individual can be held accountable, regardless of their age, location, or capacity. The evacuation of a school or public building also places those students or attendees in harm's way as "soft targets" forced to congregate outside in open public areas or ways. Police need not only to have adequate resources to protect individuals who have been evacuated, but also to evaluate the reported threat at the same time. The nature of the threat also drives the necessary response to properly evaluate its legitimacy and all responses require both fire and EMS to respond or be on standby as well.

For example, multiple bomb detection K-9's and handlers are necessary to clear large multi-room buildings like schools, and such skills require extensive training, both for the K-9 and the handler to detect potential devices. Such training is ongoing and requires constant practice making these skills too expensive for every law enforcement agency to maintain and increasing the draw on Maine State Police specialized resources. Emergency medical (EMS) and fire services are also necessary to address potential and ongoing public health emergencies as a result of any threat. Pulling already stretched fire and EMS responses in case of a mass casualty incident later determined to be false, leaves them unavailable to respond to legitimate emergencies.

Even unsubstantiated threats have cost public entities significant extra budgetary funds to adequately thwart. Because of the repeated threats schools have received, many have been forced to shoulder the cost of enhanced security measures including technology and personnel, to reduce the burden on public safety. Many schools operate in communities with no local police agencies further drawing rural protection resources from county and state law enforcement.

Additionally, resources are necessary to track such threats that often extend well beyond municipal, county and state borders. Federal agencies are often involved following incidents to assist with investigations and lean on resources, like our Fusion Center, the Maine Information Analysis Center that has the ability to communicate instantly with all states, to collect and share information that help identify organized and coordinated anonymous threats, share patterns of similar false evacuation events. These agencies have been key partners in limiting the impact of threats, quickly communicating local threats experienced elsewhere and reducing evacuations through evaluating validity based on patterns and origin of threats that are similar or identical in other states.

Absent clear knowledge that bomb or shooting threat against school is false, police will always treat each threat as legitimate. A single evacuation of a school also impacts the feeling of safety for students and schools often need to bring in outside social workers to manage the emotional health of impacted students following a false alarm. Some vulnerable students require additional support to feel safe enough to return following repeated events. Nothing about these incidents should be treated as merely an inconvenience.

Because of these enormous costs on communities and their residents, students, and resources, officials support efforts to make such deliberate behavior more accountable and proportional to the harm they cause communities. The necessary multi-agency investigation response may never be able to successfully hold individuals accountable, however that alone should not be a reason to fail to elevate the crime's accountability mechanism to dissuade future violators. Officials ask that you help add to accountability tools available to communities to address this worrying trend and vote ought to pass on LD 405.