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In Support of LD 439

"An Act to Allow Death by Suicide to Be Considered a Death While in the Line of Duty"

Presented by Representative Salisbury of Westbrook

BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PUBLIC
SAFETY

Public Hearing: March 20, 2023

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and honorable members of the Joint Standing
Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

My name is Sam Hurley, and I am the Director of Maine Emergency Medical Services, Maine
EMS, within the Department of Public Safety. I am testifying on behalf of Maine Department of
Public Safety and Maine EMS in support of LD 439, *"An Act to Allow Death by Suicide to Be
Considered a Death While in the Line of Duty."*

As many of you serving on this Committee are aware based on your experience within the public
safety field, the traumatic stressors of this line of work can weigh heavy on everyone involved.
While we will discuss multiple stressors on the EMS system today, one of the most important
things that we will discuss today is the ever-present concern over the mental health of the
professionals practicing within the field.

I have been a paramedic for many years now and I have interacted with my fair share of
traumatic experiences. While I have not functioned in all the roles within the public safety

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domain, I can safely speak as an EMS professional that the nature of our job involves the never-ending barrage of abnormal events followed by normal responses. I can still remember the first time I ever did chest compressions on an infant or the first time I saw a person decapitated.

These are all very abnormal events that for most would be life-altering and scarring, just because EMS clinicians and other public safety professionals are exposed to them every day doesn't mean that they don't have similar "normal responses." These exposures have a tendency to collect and compound, especially for those who haven't identified their mind's best way of decompressing. This is especially weighty when public safety professionals begin to question, if only I had arrived a few minutes earlier or if I had only administered that defibrillation a little bit faster. Everyone manages these stressors differently and the point in which these stressors overwhelm someone's ability to cope is different for everyone.

Unfortunately, public safety has a deep-rooted culture that fails to encourage public safety professionals to reach out to their peers, to engage, and to ask for help. Over the past few decades, we have made some strides in helping to expand peer support networks within the public safety systems, increase fitness-for-duty screening capabilities, and empowered public safety professionals to reach out to mental health professionals. HOWEVER, there are still those who fall through the cracks. Those individuals who are chased in their dreams by memories from throughout their profession of these abnormal events coupled with a variety of normal stressors that we all face in life – family, financial, etc. Despite the resources that are available, there are some of these individuals that die by suicide.

The ultimate goal of the public safety community is to make sure that no public safety professional dies by suicide. However, we understand that achieving that goal will likely not be met overnight. This bill, amended to read:

When determining whether an individual has died while in the line of duty, the chief, the State Fire Marshal, the director or the commissioner, as applicable, shall evaluate whether an individual who died by suicide died as a result of the line of duty.

... will give the Colonel of Maine State Police, the State Fire Marshal, myself, or the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections, as appropriate based on the individual's profession, the authority to consider death by suicide as a line of duty death. In doing so we are sending a resounding message to the families of first responders that we, the State of Maine, are

here to support them. While we were unable to stop their loved one before they died from suicide, we are committed to honoring their service to the State and People of Maine by administering the line of duty death benefit.

Last year, similar bipartisan legislation was signed into law in the State of New Hampshire that made deaths by suicide to be considered line of duty deaths. We too at Maine EMS and the Department of Public Safety believe it is imperative that we support our public safety professionals and continue to encourage the use of mental health resources. However, the constant barrage and collection of the abnormal, traumatic experiences may surpass the threshold for some and their ability to cope, for those individuals we have a responsibility to ensure that their families are supported – especially after they have given everything, including their lives, to the profession.

I am more than happy to answer any questions that you may have at this time, but please feel free to reach out to me anytime if there is any additional information that I can offer you and/or the Committee.

Thank you.