

## Testimony in Support of LD 1159

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Genevieve Lysen, I have been in sustained recovery for 10 years, I am a certified recovery coach and I am the Organizing Director for the Maine People's Alliance. Our 32,000 members stretch from Kittery to Fort Kent. We are committed to creating a state of Maine where everyone has what they need, everyone contributes what they can, and no one is left behind.

I am pleased to testify today in favor of LD 1159, An Act to Establish a Pilot Project Regarding Harm Reduction Health Centers.

We can all agree that we are losing far too many Mainers to overdose, more than 700 people died last year. They were our sisters, brothers, cousins, co-workers, neighbors, parents, and children.

The last time this committee heard a version of this bill my cousin Samuel testified before this committee. He can't be here today because Samuel died in August 2021 alone in his home, due to an accidental drug-poisoning. His body wasn't discovered until 5 days after his death. Sam and I grew up together in Lewiston. I'm an only child and Sam was like a brother to me when I was a kid. He was 34 years old when he died. Like I do, Sam struggled with depression issues, substance use disorder, and though he worked so hard on his recovery, he couldn't find the help or belonging he needed to thrive. Sam's experiences over the years with the courts and law enforcement made him feel worthless, like a criminal, when he just needed help and love. When Sam died he was 4 years into recovery and re-establishing a close, loving relationship with his son, Milo. If Sam had been able to access a harm reduction health center, I expect he would be alive today. As you've heard from others today, there has never been a fatal overdose in a harm reduction health center, anywhere in the world, ever. And not only would he be alive, but Sam could have also accessed the supports he needed to remain in sustained recovery.

If our goal is to save lives, we know the creation of harm reduction centers would work. Doing so is not condoning drug use, it's facing the reality that people do use drugs and saying that saving lives is the most important thing. Until we are able to meet people where they are and save the lives that we can, we will continue to see countless preventable deaths. Thank you for your time today.

Genevieve Lysen, Lewiston

Hello and good afternoon. My name is Samuel Jonas. I am a person of recovery from heroin addiction and it truly is an honor to be standing here today in favor of LD 949, An Act to Prevent Overdose Deaths.

I grew up between the Lewiston and Readfield areas of Maine, raised by an enormous and loving family. Even still, I had many insecurities as a teenager, of which, I never properly learned how to cope with. So, as a typical young adult experimenting with drinking and smoking, I found a form of pseudo confidence. Artificial happiness. Although fun at first, looking back I can clearly see that my addictive tendencies quite literally went from 0 to 100 overnight. When I was 19 years old I was introduced to morphine in the form of a pill. I was elated. Completely enamored. If I could stop you for a moment, and ask you to recall a time in your life when you were the happiest, possibly a particular circumstance that completely filled your heart, that is what I felt at that moment. Multiplied by 10. Every problem I had ever known up to that point was simply gone. Immediately, that was my way to cope.

It took no time to spiral out of control. By 20 I was addicted to heroin. Someone said it was stronger and cheaper and stronger is what I wanted. That's the horror of active addiction - when we hear that someone has overdosed, we seek out the source like a bloodhound. I started getting into a vicious cycle of losing my job, and then my partner, and then my home and belongings, and then going to jail. And then I would snap out of it long enough to realize it was all gone, decide to "make a change", and try to piece it all back together. Over and over. I've participated in IOP 3 times, completed an in-house 45 day program, counseling, the whole nine yards, and still I would always fall back into wreckage. This is not to say that those things didn't help - they did and they do - but I wasn't truly ready for change. I was afraid. While trapped in that revolving door, I overdosed twice. The first time was living in Portland with my son's mother, before he was conceived, sleeping in our room. She found me, thank god, on the bathroom floor, purple with a needle still in my arm. The second time was in a parking lot at a local gas station here in Lewiston where I thought nothing of it to get high real quick while my friend ran in for a soda. He came out to find me barely breathing. Thankfully, the hospital was right around the corner. He drove me to the emergency room doors and when the EMTs came out and pulled me out of

the car, a needle fell off my lap. That's how fast I went out. On both occasions I didn't even have the time to put the cap back on. It is nothing short of a miracle that I am standing here today. If it were not for being in the company of other individuals I surely would not be. And even still, I may not have been so lucky had I not been around those particular people. That's why I'm advocating for LD 949. A safe place, staffed by professionals, where active addicts can use and receive education of services available. We only change when we're ready.