

LD 1159 Testimony
April 10, 2023
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Lewiston, Maine

Good Afternoon Chairs Baldacci and Meyer and members of HHS Committee,

My name is Molly Whyte, I am the program manager of the Church of Safe Injection and I reside in Lewiston Maine. I am here today testifying in support of LD 1159.

I've spent the better part of the last 3 years working in harm reduction, learning from those who many of us consider our mentors - Jesse Harvey and Kari Morissette. Unfortunately, these two will not be standing before you to testify today as they both have sadly died, Jesse in 2020 and Kari in 2022, of accidental overdose. They were both alone when they died.

Maine lost 716 people last year and while we all say this as a number, I am hoping today we recognize the life behind the digit. Each number represents countless loved ones who are left suffering the loss of a family member or friend.

I think we can all agree Maine has made incredible progress regarding substance use related initiatives - we have more work to do. LD 1159 is one of those large strides we can take to a better and safer future for all of us.

May 6th 2022 will forever be ingrained in my memory. Jesse Harvey received his posthumous degree from University of Southern Maine and his mom, Catherine, was presented his diploma. We wanted to do something special to celebrate this achievement so CoSI staff, friends from MARR, and ME-RAP met for dinner at Red Sea restaurant in Portland. After planning everything and ensuring Catherine was supported, Kari decided to stay home. She was struggling. Twice in the weeks prior she had overdosed but on the day of Jesse's diploma ceremony, she seemed optimistic, even mentioning interest in treatment options and wanting to access therapy. It sounded like she was ok and just wanted to rest at home.

Kari would take her last breath, alone in our home, during this dinner. During this dinner, I heard the screams of my then 14 year old when she called me. She is the one who found Kari, who had overdosed and died. For all the parents in the room today, imagine trying to comfort your child from 40 minutes away on the phone. I arrived home to Lewiston Police in my home. As I tried to answer their questions and process what happened, I was faced with the realization that Kari, my daughter's other parent, my best friend, and the director of our organization, was gone.

If a safe place like a Harm Reduction Health Center had existed - she might still be here. Many of our loved ones who died might be. I'm not naive enough to think we can stop drug use. It's

been a part of our culture for centuries. I'm not naive enough to think that the War on Drugs protects our community. The War on Drugs is a war on people who use drugs. Period. When are we going to recognize that this is a war on humanity?

Personally, I have attended more funerals and memorials than I have weddings or college graduations. We are not doing enough. Society has made a judgment call and decided that people who use drugs are less than, deserve less, should be treated as less. Our loved ones are not less. They are our children, parents, aunts and uncles, friends, family. So many people love them. We should ALL love them.

This pilot program will not solve all of the issues we face in Maine regarding substance use - but it is an evidence-based step proven effective that provides safety and education beyond what those of us who operate syringe service programs can do. It gives us another tool to use to help those who we serve. Those who we love, those who someone else loves. There has not been one - not ONE - fatal overdose in an HRHC ever - in any country - ever.

Today, we hope you stand with those of us here who do this work day in day out - Our hundreds of clients- most of whom are unhoused- have stated that if a Harm Reduction Health Center existed they would use it - and give us the support we need to do the work we love.

In the words of our founder, Jesse Harvey, "People who use drugs do not deserve to die" and this is why I stand before you and ask that you please vote in favor of LD 1159.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you have.