

To: Health and Human Services Committee

From: Jess Falero, Church Of Safe Injection

Date: April 10 2023

Re: In favor of LD 1159: An Act to Establish a Pilot Project Regarding Harm Reduction Health Centers

Good afternoon Chair Baldacci, Chair Meyer, and other honorable representatives of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Jess Falero, I live in Portland. I am a Harm Reduction Outreach Specialist for the Church of Safe Injection and I am testifying in favor of LD:1159.

When we talk about drugs and people who use drugs, it's usually in terms that aren't helpful or accurate. As a culture and society, we have this tendency to take things we don't understand or are afraid of and turn those feelings into a judgment of morality, or of character. Here's what we don't talk about: why do people use drugs? And why is it we have allowed 1800 Mainers in the last two years to lose their lives to an OD? We know the answers. They have been shown to us by the many Harm Reduction Health Centers around the world

We can all agree on this: the trauma of being responsible for your friend's life isn't something anyone should have to bear alone. We are a community that has been beaten down by stigma, shame, and institutional oppression; and we are a community whose voice has been silenced and deemed unworthy.

At my job we have two main ways of interacting with people who use drugs: outreach and our drop in center. Outreach consists of going to encampments where unhoused people are staying, and offering services that a health center would provide. We provide needle exchanges, wound care, referrals to services, and information on how to reverse overdoses. In the drop-in center, we have the same services plus more opportunities to connect with people who use drugs and their loved ones and connect them to the care they need.

Those 1800 Mainers we've lost in the last two years? 15 of them were my friends. These are people who worked hard. In life, in recovery, in survival. People that have been filling the cracks in the system that have always existed for those in the margins of our society but are often ignored due to this perceived lack of morality and sometimes an inherent hatred for people who use drugs.

In Portland they just opened a new shelter about 7 miles away from the downtown area. They have a shuttle to help facilitate getting people from downtown and to the shelter. The caveat is there are no needles allowed on the shuttle or in the shelter. Because of this people, who use drugs will not be able to access those services. That increases the danger of harm from overdose, withdrawal, and traveling and living outdoors in all weather. That in turn increases the chance of disease transmission rates due to uninhabitable living conditions.

People who use drugs survive and save each other every day. Failing to pass this bill and create this service will mean the continual rise of overdose deaths and a continued worsening of this epidemic that affects every community no matter how rural or urban.

For years this state has ostracized people who use drugs and lacked the political will to address poverty and health issues that are major drivers of drug use. For this, and for those 1800 lives we've lost in the last 730 days, all of us are responsible.

The members of this committee have an incredible opportunity to make history and be a part of changing the lives of the millions of people who live in this state. We can radically transform both overdose rates and the lives of people who use drugs. Remember: Not one person has ever died from an overdose in any of these facilities around the world.

| Please vote ought to pass on LD:1159.