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Testimony of Senator Lisa Keim before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
LD 1801, “Resolve, to Increase Transparency and Evaluate Emergency Response Through a COVID-19 Review Commission”
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Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and the distinguished members of the Committee on Health and Human Services I am Lisa Keim, and I proudly represent the citizens of Senate District 19, which includes Northern Oxford County and communities in Franklin County. I am proud to sponsor LD 1801, “Resolve, to Increase Transparency and Evaluate Emergency Response Through a COVID-19 Review Commission.”

Paraphrasing Spanish philosopher George Santayana, Winston Churchill said “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

The Spanish flu of 1918 had a devastating effect on the world, claiming an estimated 21 to 50 million lives over two years. In his 1989 book, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic*, Alfred W. Crosby points out that the Spanish flu was omitted from all the great midcentury American history textbooks, even by those written by historians who lived through it.

COVID-19 was a once in a century event. It required an all of government response. Worldwide, deaths have been estimated to just under 7 million. If we think of COVID as a war, it is the most expansive global struggle since the Second World War. Yet it is one that we fought without a prepared army or a battle plan. Americans spent more public money on the crisis than anyone. Yet the U.S. suffered many more casualties than any other affluent country, with the impact on Mainers being of the most severe.

Countless decisions were made to protect public health. Shifting decisions may have been reasonable given the best information at the time, but the consequences were not measured. A full accounting of the State’s decision making process and impact is in order.

Review commissions, such as After Action Reviews in the military, are a regular response within our federal government, its departments and agencies, and within our branches of the military. The purpose of these reviews is to learn about what happened, how we reacted, what was result of those actions, and how was it good/bad/indifferent.

Despite our best efforts, nobody is infallible and it is certain that mistakes were made in COVID policies. As lawmakers, it is our duty to learn from our mistakes. Across the political spectrum, it seems that leaders have drifted into treating this pandemic as if it were an unavoidable natural catastrophe. This way of thinking risks not only failing to reform, but also failing to remember what actually happened.

As the emergency comes to an end, the greatest danger is that we rush to move on, to forget. Future generations will face another pandemic. Although viruses are different and there is no way to know how the next pandemic will spread or how it will affect people, we owe it to Maine's future and our community to gain a more complete understanding of how this pandemic was handled.

They will want to know: What was the impact on overall health of social distancing and severe disruption of normal life? Were schools closed for too long and what impact did closures have on educational attainment and mental health? Was the cure worse than the disease? How well did the government balance the needs of keeping everyone safe from the spread of a dangerous, unknown disease with allowing personal thriving and economic stability?

LD 1801 sets up a commission to review and study the state's response to the pandemic. Government oversight should be an equally bipartisan process. Therefore, this commission is designed with equal members from the Democratic and Republican caucuses and one Independent House member.

This resolve isn't about placing blame on people or agencies. It is about learning what worked and what didn't so that we can be better prepared if and when this happens again.

Thousands of good people and organizations, all across Maine, made a dramatic shift from 'normal' routine and actions, putting forth heroic, life-saving efforts, which, as I remember in my district, started first with hand sewn masks and meals delivered to shut-ins and health professionals of every level stepping out into the scary unknown to be our first line of defense. Maine people are up for any challenge and made us proud; but we must do better in the future.

The COVID pandemic was all-encompassing and all-consuming - touching every life and every communities. Now that the pandemic is behind us, surely a teachable moment has arrived. Hindsight is 2020; but only if we take time to look and make an honest assessment.

This resolve will provide us with the opportunity to look back and evaluate policies that dominated the lives of Mainers for years and leave future generations better prepared.