



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1400
TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Nina Azella Milliken

276 Turkey Farm Road
Blue Hill, ME 04614
Residence: (207) 412-8828
Nina.Milliken@legislature.maine.gov

Testimony of Representative Nina Milliken supporting
LD 1975, An Act to Implement a Statewide Public Health Response to Substance Use and
Amend the Laws Governing Scheduled Drugs
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

January 17, 2024

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Nina Milliken and I represent the communities of Blue Hill, Brooksville, Castine, Sedgwick, Surry and Trenton in the Maine House. I am here today to testify in strong support of **LD 1975, An Act to Implement a Statewide Public Health Response to Substance Use and Amend the Laws Governing Scheduled Drugs**.

I have spoken several times in this building about my experiences with living with substance use disorder but have seldom delved into the details in public spaces. I think that sometimes members of the legislature don't fully recognize what that experience can look like and how devastating it can be. So, today I want to focus on some of the shame associated with living with a disorder whose symptoms are currently considered criminal. I aim to shed light on my own experiences with a diagnosable ailment and the criminal, though not immoral, acts I committed as a consequence of my addictions.

When I was 12 years old, I was sexually assaulted by an older boy that attended my school. He later informed many of our shared classmates that I was not good at the sex acts he forced me to perform on him, and I was mocked relentlessly for this. A short time after that I was offered cannabis and alcohol for the first time, and having the fear of adding to my ridicule in school, as well as the typical angst of a child this age, I accepted these offerings, kicking off what would be 18 years of addictions. In that time, I was sexually assaulted several more times, often while drunk or high. When I moved to Maine full time, I met and later married a man who was not entirely kind to me. I spent nearly 4 years in the clutches of an opiate addiction that was all consuming. I hid from my family. I lived in a home with busted pipes and caving in ceilings. One winter, we put an ice cube on the floor of our kitchen and it sat there for nearly 2 weeks.



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Nina Azella Milliken

276 Turkey Farm Road

Blue Hill, ME 04614

Residence: (207) 412-8828

Nina.Milliken@legislature.maine.gov

My body bears many scars from these addictions. I have teeth missing. I have burns from where I extinguished lit cigarettes on my chest while nodding off high. My nose has permanent damage from snorting various narcotics. My lungs are healing and my mouth has required five oral surgeries to look the way it does today. I have more oral procedures coming in the near future.

I share these details not to solicit sympathy but to emphasize the profound shame intertwined with the lives of individuals grappling with drug addictions. We hide from our families, lose friends and ultimately lose ourselves. In what I now view as an act of kindness, my ex-husband informed my family about my heroin addiction - though he was driven more by manipulation than kindness. This act prompted me to hide further. I stayed out of state for several months, too ashamed to face my family. It took me weeks to reconnect with them by phone. I didn't want to see my family for nearly six months after they learned of my addiction. During that time, I started using other substances. I developed a liking for cocaine and other stimulants, but never touched an opiate again after November of 2014.

A while after learning about my heroin addiction, my father shocked me by confessing that he had had his own struggle with the same addiction. Despite not being the best father, we were very close friends and the revelation highlighted the shame he, too, harbored. Addiction, in addition to serving as a coping mechanism for my early traumas, is genetic and was ingrained in my blood from birth. My father and I shared most of our time together drinking and smoking cigarettes, including the night before an aneurysm in his aorta ruptured. An attempt to repair the damage was unsuccessful and I made the gut wrenching decision to turn off the machinery that was keeping him alive on December 22, 2018. I held his hand as his heart stopped. His death kicked off a six-week bender for me. But on February 12, 2019—five years ago next month—I woke up, broke my remaining cigarettes and never touched a drink, drug or cigarette again. My father's passing likely saved my life.

In thinking about the purpose of making drug use illegal, I question its effectiveness in deterring usage. In the depths of my heroin addiction, my fear of arrest kept me from asking for help. There were numerous barriers to asking for help—the shame of my assaults, a failed marriage, an inhospitable home, desperate measures for drug money and the fear that my family would abandon me. On top of all of that was the fact that at any moment, I could have landed in jail for



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Nina Azella Milliken

276 Turkey Farm Road

Blue Hill, ME 04614

Residence: (207) 412-8828

Nina.Milliken@legislature.maine.gov

having the drugs in my possession. This barrier is unnecessary and serves no good purpose. We can and should remove it.

Criminalization perpetuates stigma, which, in turn, sustains the addiction. Drugs being illegal made my addiction worse, not better. Additionally, all of the things that I needed to find sobriety, I had to piecemeal together by myself and I was extraordinarily privileged to have the resources that I did to cobble together my own pathway to sobriety. When I quit heroin and left my husband in 2014, I was effectively left homeless. Kind friends took me in. I had to leave Maine, my home state and get support through my withdrawals, and through my emotional chaos. During the most emotionally and physically challenging moments of my life, I was left to my own devices to secure my own safety and sobriety. This bill would enable our state to offer all of those resources to everyone. We could turn the tide on this crisis.

Maine must address the gaping wounds in our state's substance use disorder emergency. I survived my addictions, but many friends, neighbors and loved ones have not. They need treatment, and as a legislature, we must dismantle barriers to provide that treatment. Love, not handcuffs or fines, is what our friends in suffering deserve.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the racism inherent in the criminalization of narcotics in the United States. When asked about the beginnings of the war on drugs, John Ehrlichman, one of the architects of the war on drugs and White House counsel and assistant to President Richard Nixon stated, "You want to know what this [war on drugs] was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and Black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

It is unacceptable to me that this has gone on for so long, that small quantities of drugs continue to be criminal despite the explanation by one of the creators of the war on drugs that the war was



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Nina Azella Milliken

276 Turkey Farm Road

Blue Hill, ME 04614

Residence: (207) 412-8828

Nina.Milliken@legislature.maine.gov

built with the intention of harming communities of color. It is our responsibility as members of this body to correct the wrongs of the people who filled halls of power prior to our arrival. We need to fix this and we need to do it soon.

I ask you to support LD 1975, a crucial piece of legislation. Your time is appreciated, and I am open to answering literally any questions you may have.