

Testimony in Support of LD 1975

1/17/24

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

I'm the Rev. Dr. Jodi Cohen Hayashida. I am a Unitarian Universalist minister and resident of Auburn and I am here today testifying in support of LD 1975 on behalf of the Maine Council of Churches- a coalition of seven mainline Protestant denominations who have over 400 local churches across the state with more than 50,000 parishioners in their care.

As a minister of more than two decades, I have spent a significant amount of time in the presence of death. As I am sure many of you have experienced, some deaths, while cause for grief, are also beautiful- peaceful and after a life well lived. Some deaths feel cruel- illness or accidents that rob us of loved ones before we, or they, are ready. Other deaths are violent and horrifying. I have sat in the presence of them all. I'm guessing many of us have. It is more grief than I can hold at times. Perhaps for you as well. But I'm here today because there is yet another kind of death that we all know, death that is cause not only for grief but also outrage, because it is preventable and yet we, as a society, choose not to prevent it.

Our current practice of prioritizing the criminalization of drug use over implementing a comprehensive, statewide public health response allowed nearly 600 Mainers to die of overdose last year. There are approximately ~~17,000~~ ^{169,000} Mainers who are currently actively seeking treatment for SUD who cannot access it and there is only one receiving center in the entire state open 24 hrs a day. And yet we spend \$111 million annually on arrest through incarceration, despite substantial evidence that incarceration is often a barrier to, not a catalyst for, recovery.

Bishop William Barber often speaks of what he calls the "death measure" of regressive public policy- he means by that not just awareness but acceptance that a policy will allow or even cause a percentage of people to die, usually some of the most vulnerable among us. The death measure of our current policies and practices regarding drug use and access to effective treatment is severe. Our people, holy and beloved, are dying at terrifying and devastating rates. And we are grieving. And we are outraged.

LD 1975 is a chance to begin to move beyond the death measure of criminalization and instead choose the evidence-based, life saving practices of public health measures. We all know that grief is an unavoidable part of life and death ultimately comes to us all. But, there are rare and precious moments when we are not powerless, even in the face of that reality. Right now, you are not powerless. The Maine Council of Churches urges you to support LD 1975.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Dr. Jodi Cohen Hayashida

On Behalf of the Maine Council of Churches