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THE MAINE SENATE  
131st Legislature

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Augusta, Maine 04333

**Testimony introducing**

**LD 2105, “Resolve, to Protect and Enhance Access to Behavioral Health Services in Androscoggin County and Surrounding Communities”**

**Senator Peggy Rotundo**

**January 24, 2024**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and other distinguished members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Peggy Rotundo and I represent Senate District 21, the City of Lewiston. I am here today to introduce LD 2105, “Resolve, to Protect and Enhance Access to Behavioral Health Services in Androscoggin County and Surrounding Communities”.

St. Mary’s hospital in Lewiston is the only provider of acute behavioral health services in the Lewiston area and one of the major providers of these services statewide. Its behavioral health emergency room and its inpatient detox unit draw patients from all across the state, and its behavioral health inpatient units for children and adults serve patients from 10 of our 16 counties. This bill would provide a badly-needed lifeline to ensure that these services remain available, while allowing St. Mary’s to move forward with plans to address a critical gap in the existing mental health care system.

St. Mary’s has experienced staggering losses in recent years, including \$48 million in 2022 and a projected \$30 million for 2023. This year, despite recent MaineCare rate increases, its behavioral health services alone face a \$10.6 million operating loss. Representatives of St. Mary’s are here and will explain further how providing critical relief from this loss now can set the hospital on a course to sustain and expand its behavioral health capacity. They can also outline the steps they have taken to regain financial equilibrium.

My city of Lewiston suffered a terrible act of random violence on October 25, when a man with documented mental illness killed 18 people. After the shooting, there appeared a national news story

titled “After Mass Shooting, Problems with Maine’s Mental Healthcare System Come Into Focus,” saying that “the state has been struggling to address the needs of residents for years” and quoting the director of suicide prevention at NAMI Maine as saying that we are in a “perfect storm of people needing help and not enough resources to address it.”<sup>1</sup>

It might be appropriate here to provide data on Maine’s struggles to provide enough behavioral health treatment to meet the growing need, but this committee has certainly already seen the data and knows about the desperate need for these services. It has been a bipartisan priority for many years. As Senate Chair of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, I know that the Governor and Legislature have come together recently to provide funds for mental health services, and I welcome this investment.

Now, in the aftermath of the Lewiston shooting, we are searching for policy solutions to keep us safer and better identify those who may be ill enough to do others harm. At the same time, we are still dealing with the fallout from years of isolation during the pandemic, resulting in a skyrocketing need for all kinds of mental health services. I believe an important component of our response to these challenges should be to reinforce the existing resources in our state. St. Mary’s is staffed with dedicated professionals who do excellent work. Let’s prioritize keeping this facility funded so it can continue to work on the front lines of this crisis.

I should note that St. Mary’s is not asking for a lifeline from the state so that it can continue in a state of emergency until it needs money again. St. Mary’s has addressed its funding shortfall responsibly and proactively, implementing a strategic plan that has already achieved results. Representatives of St. Mary’s are here and can speak to this important, necessary work. But my understanding is that relief from the current \$10.6 million behavioral health losses is essential for current services to continue without curtailment and for the hospital to fill an existing service gap by opening a new day hospital program. Given how many communities rely on St. Mary’s for these services, and how barren the landscape would be without St. Mary’s, I believe it is important for the state to take action.

Thank you for considering this bill to help our fellow Mainers who face challenges we can’t imagine get the help they need. I am happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/maine-run-challenges-address-mental-health-experts/story?id=104603347>