



Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and the good members of the HHS committee,

My name is Betsy Sweet, and I am here on behalf of the Behavioral Health Collaborative – a group of eight community based mental health providers – and I am a resident of Hallowell.

I believe we are here – each of us in our respective roles – at this exact moment in time because we are at a pivot point in Maine history. I know that sounds dramatic, but I believe at my core that it is true. The Chinese symbol for crisis is made up of danger and opportunity. The danger Maine suffered on Oct 25, and in the growing culture of violence as acceptable combined with the undeniable danger of unmet needs is clear and felt by each one of us. But there is a deeper level of danger as well. There is a danger that we – legislators, the Governor, advocates, and Maine people- will miss this opportunity. We will miss this extraordinary confluence of events that has shone a spotlight on the unmet mental health needs and the cry for safety and a shift in our culture away from violence and toward compassion and kindness. And that demands a new level of action. In every arena of our lives in Maine – in our schools, our hospitals, our towns, and cities, in our law enforcement system, and in our families – there is a clarion call for one thing – more community mental health services. It is foundational to the health and safety of everyone, everywhere. Mental health issues are epidemic, and the time must be now to make the systemic and bold investments that will result in meaningful change.

And that is where the opportunity lies.

This moment offers the opportunity be bold and courageous enough to make historic investments to bring safety and care to Maine people. It does not “meet the moment” to make small tweaks or to add a thing here or there and hope that it somehow will lead to bigger and better things on someone else’s watch.

The mental health investments called for in this bill are significant, and they build on what we all know works, what this committee has already done and on what the Governor has called for her budget. But it requires more – more investment, faster and with more dedicated purpose and urgency than we have brought to it before. Crisis intervention and mobile crisis are critical services – medication management is the key component to thousands of people who depend on this help to stay healthy and able to live and work in their communities. And the current level of these services is inadequate to provide access statewide or to all the people who need it.

And here is why I believe this is an incredible opportunity we have each been offered at exactly this moment. We have the crisis that brought us here, the underlying culture that has contributed to increasing stress and violence, the unmet need we see every day – AND we have money. Yes. Money. There is 107 million dollars of unallocated surplus in this budget.

If you pass and fund this bill and the Maine mental health resilience package which you have seen, you will make long term investments that do meet this moment.

Please. Be bold. Demand that 48 million dollars of the unallocated surplus goes to meet this historic moment of both demonstrated need and the ability to do something truly significant about it.

Please do not be distracted by “can’t, too fast, too much, we are already trying, just wait”. That is not what this time demands of your role and your leadership. Maine can do incredible things fast – think ice storm, and flood recovery. So, yes, we can do this. I was blessed to be raised by an incredible mother who faced some incredible challenges. Never once did she “can’t” she only ever asked, “how?”.

I, this moment in history, and the people of Maine are asking you to please be bold leaders. Do not fall prey to the warnings that this will be hard, that this will demand too much of us. Of course it will. But together, with your courageous leadership, we can do this and turn the despair of so many people into hope and real, tangible help. Please don’t say “can’t” to this moment. Let us all get to work on how.

LD 2237 provides this path forward. Please take it.

Thank you for all you do and who you are. Thousands of Mainers are both counting on you, and are grateful for you.