



**Testimony of Maine Public Health Association in Support of:
LD 2237: An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health and Well-being by Expanding Services and
Coordinating Violence Prevention Resources**

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
State House, Room 126
Monday, March 4, 2024

Good morning, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Rebecca Boulos. I am a resident of South Portland, and executive director of Maine Public Health Association. MPHA is in support of LD 2237: “An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health and Well-being by Expanding Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention Resources.”

MPHA is the state’s oldest, largest, and most diverse association for public health professionals. We represent more than 700 individual members and 60 organizations across the state. MPHA works to optimize the health of people and places in Maine through advocacy, education, partnerships, and public health workforce development. We are not tied to a national agenda, which means we are responsive to the needs of Maine’s communities, and we take that responsibility seriously.

Violence in America, and here in Maine, is a public health crisis that affects people in all stages of life, from infancy to the elderly. It leaves physical and emotional scars, derails lives, and erodes communities by reducing productivity, decreasing property values, and disrupting social services.¹ Violence is also a vicious cycle – exposure to violence is a strong predictor of committing future violence.²

Violence in Maine:

- In 2023, 18.3% of middle schoolers reported that violence in their home, or the threat of violence, made them want to leave home, even if only for a short while.³
- Domestic violence represented 29% of total reported assaults in 2022.⁴
- 1 in 5 Mainers will experience sexual assault during their lifetime.⁵
- According to the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 89% of firearm fatalities in 2021 were suicides, a rate significantly higher than the national average.⁶
- One of the deadliest mass shootings in America occurred here in Maine, claiming 19 people’s lives.

While we need to take immediate action to limit access to deadly weapons, a public health approach to addressing the root causes of violence means investing in communities, bolstering trauma-informed services, and changing norms and behaviors that lead to reductions in violence long term.⁷

LD 2237 would address violence and support public health and safety by providing funding to:

- Invest in a comprehensive community mental health infrastructure to improve and expand access to services, including 24/7 mobile services, and establish at least six crisis receiving centers across the

state. The crisis receiving center in Portland has served more than 1,200 people in the two years since it opened and has shown to be an invaluable community resource for people in need of immediate care.

- Improve coordination between existing community intervention and support programs, including 911 and 988 response systems.
- Reduce waiting lists for and expand access to medication management services provided by the Office of Behavioral Health.
- Establish a new Office of Violence Prevention in the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention to oversee a holistic approach that utilizes educational outreach, data, and resource allocation to community partners.
- Work with stakeholders like gun shops on educational materials and training for suicide prevention.

We respectfully request you to please vote LD 2237 “Ought to Pass.” Thank you for considering our testimony.

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Violence prevention: A public health issue.

² Weaver CM, Borkowski JG, Whitman TL. Violence breeds violence: Childhood exposure and adolescent conduct problems. *J Community Psychol.* 2008;36(1):96–112.

³ Maine Department of Health and Human Services & Maine Department of Education. 2023. Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey Middle School Report.

⁴ State of Maine Department of Public Safety. 2022. Crime in Maine 2022.

⁵ Dumont R & Shaler G. 2015. Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine.

⁶ Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Maine DHHS. Feb 2023. Report pursuant to 22 MRS, Ch. 256-A §1425.

⁷ American Public Health Association. 2018. Violence is a public health issue: Public health is essential to understanding and treating violence in the U.S.