



TO: The Honorable Joseph Baldacci
The Honorable Michele Meyer
Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services

DATE: March 4, 2024

RE: LD 2237 - An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health, and Well-being by Expanding
Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention Resources

Good morning Senator Baldacci and Representative Meyer,

My name is Allyson Gardner. I'm a resident of Fryeburg and the Director of Maine Students Vote, our youth programs, for the League of Women Voters. I am testifying Ought to Pass on LD 2237.

For decades, the League of Women Voters has recognized the need for publicly supported violence prevention programs. We avidly support this bill's creation of an office of Violence Prevention. An improved and expanded database will provide legislators with more information about how to devise effective interventions. Such a database needs to include a straightforward link between health data and criminal justice data. Currently, Maine provides fairly detailed documentation of homicides, but much more information is needed concerning suicides. Other states have revised their firearm suicide prevention programs by gathering data that linked medical and inpatient health records with police data to determine such things as who originally bought the suicide firearm, how long ago it was purchased, and whether or not the victim could have passed a background check the day they died. More data is also needed on violent crimes and aggravated assaults in Maine. The database needs to contain comprehensive information about nonfatal gun injuries including the number of injuries, circumstances, and location to name just a few. Trustworthy, broad data is a bridge to effective policy-making that can help reduce violence in Maine.

The Office of Prevention would also establish a grant program to award grants to community violence intervention programs. These programs are run by local, community-based organizations, and this funding would support the success of these groups as they work towards safer communities. Community violence intervention programs are an effective tool to prevent the cycles of gun violence that are all too common in neighborhoods across the state. This grant program creates an essential opportunity for Mainers to create Maine solutions.

The need is there: 25% of adults in Maine have a mental health condition; 14,000 Mainers aged 12-17 have depression; and nearly 50% of these young people did not receive any care last year. 20% of Mainers live in a community that does not have enough mental health professionals.¹ With numbers like

¹ <https://namimaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/MaineStateFactSheet-6.pdf>

these being reported by our neighbors, how can we not expand the resources available to DHHS and our Office of Behavioral Health? We firmly support increasing the funding to the Office of Behavioral Health in order to reduce waiting lists and expand access to medication, telehealth services, and increase employee recruitment.

These statistics also drive home the need to expand Maine's mental health crisis intervention mobile response services. In addition, this bill helps our rural communities gain access to more equitable care by establishing crisis centers in the six counties that currently do not have this resource.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.
