

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

Presented to Maine's Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

As the state's largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization, NAMI Maine strongly encourages the passage of LD 2237: An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health, and Well-being by Expanding Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention Resources. Before Covid 19, one in four Mainers was diagnosed and sought treatment for a mental health challenge each year, with a system that received national attention for experiencing a critical workforce shortage. Many members of this distinguished committee have fought for the decimated mental health system, attempting to rebuild and restore it. As a result, we are standing at the tragic cusp of returning our mental health system to the one that was the envy and model of the nation in the early 2000s, which was built following another tragic event in the City of Waterville at that time.

This bill presents evidence-based and best practice models that are invaluable in other parts of the country. This committee has experienced discussions regarding that in June of 2022, the United States Department of Justice found that the State of Maine was violating the rights of children with disabilities, primarily mental health, with an overreliance on state institutions, such as the criminal justice system and psychiatric hospitals.¹ It is critical to understand that although Maine is currently facing one investigation and vulnerable to a potential lawsuit, the United States Department of Justice is has been investigating numerous municipal, county, and state entities for civil rights violations as it relates to the overutilization of the criminal justice system and the institutions, while significantly lacking in community mental health resources. NAMI Maine provides this context to illustrate the dire need that exists to address the mental health crisis services in the state and to exemplify that this bill addresses and attempts to rectify many gaps within the system in a comprehensive and non-stigmatizing manner.

In 2023, 37 police departments responded to a total of 5,785 calls solely coded as mental health-related. Among these, 2,344 calls were successfully stabilized on the scene by law enforcement, showcasing their capacity for de-escalation and support without further intervention. Regrettably, 101 calls necessitated mandatory arrests due to both on-scene presentations and state law constraints. However, within this subset, 1,281 individuals were voluntarily transported to hospitals, indicating a willingness to engage with appropriate mental health resources. Further analysis reveals that only 145 of these calls reported homicidal ideation, while 1,097 involved aggressive behavior. This underscores that approximately 21% of these calls posed significant safety concerns, necessitating law enforcement involvement.

¹ United States' Investigation of Maine's Behavioral Health System for Children under Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act ([justice.gov](https://www.justice.gov))

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Nevertheless, our mental health resources, particularly crisis services, remain depleted. Thus, this bill aims to rebuild and enhance our mental health infrastructure while implementing practical, evidence-based programs to address recent concerns.

For years, NAMI Maine has championed the establishment of a robust, evidence-based mental health system. The events of October 25th shook our state to its core, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive programming and services to safeguard all residents and propel our state forward. Therefore, I urge the committee to make meaningful investments in critical mental health services outlined in this bill. By doing so, we can ensure the protection and well-being of our citizens while fortifying our state against future challenges.

ABOUT NAMI MAINE: Incorporated in 1984, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maine Chapter (NAMI Maine) is the state's largest grassroots mental health organization. With support from national and regional affiliates, the agency is dedicated to building better lives for everyone impacted by behavioral health concerns. NAMI Maine engages with leaders and community partners at all levels to improve the state's mental health system through collaboration and education.

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