

March 6, 2024

LD 2224 - An Act to Strengthen Public Safety by Improving Maine's Firearm Laws and Mental Health System

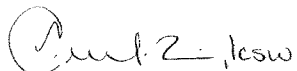
Greetings Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and honorable members of the Committee on Judiciary. My name is Chris McLaughlin, and I am humbled to be the Executive Director of the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW ME). I also am a licensed clinical social worker with almost 25 years of experience providing and leading behavioral health services across a variety of treatment settings here in Maine. On behalf of our over 1000 members here in Maine and as a trained behavioral health clinician, I'm honored to share thoughts **neither for nor against** this piece of proposed legislation.

As you all know, the United States faces an epidemic of gun violence. Approximately 41,000 Americans die from gun violence each year. Horrifically, gun violence is now the leading cause of death for American children. Maine now has the highest gun death rate in New England. We have seen gun deaths, both homicides and suicides, rise here in Maine. Despite these statistics, though, Maine's current gun laws are comparatively quite weak. To be clear, NASW ME is fully supportive of legislation that will make meaningful and common sense changes to the epidemic of gun violence and gun deaths. However, we have some concerns with a few of the aspects of LD 2224 that we want to share with the Committee.

1. First and foremost, the language of LD 2224 seems to promote the stigmatizing message that mental illness is equated with crime and that folks with mental illness are dangerous and need more external controls over their behaviors. We believe this to be a harmful stereotype as we know, individuals with mental illness are more likely to be the victim, not the perpetrator of gun violence. Therefore, when creating policies regarding possession of firearms, we must take mental health out of the equation.
2. LD 2224 seems to ask public safety officials to make an assessment of whether an individual has mental illness. Further, this bill implies that mental health professionals should make an assessment of dangerousness. Given the training and scope of practice for these two disciplines, it appears that folks are being asked to practice outside of their respective lanes.
3. We are concerned that this proposal makes an already lengthy process even longer. To truly impact public safety and wellbeing, what Maine needs is a more efficient and timely process that empowers professionals to act swiftly at the highest levels of their licenses and training.

LD 2224 takes some steps in the right direction. We believe that further work is needed, though, to craft a bill that will make a difference here in Maine without further stigmatizing individuals impacted by mental illness.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



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