

LD 298: An Act to Employ Mental Health Personnel Within the Maine State Police
Presented to the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee

As the state's largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization, NAMI Maine opposes LD 298: An Act to Employ Mental Health Personnel within the Maine State Police. NAMI Maine works closely with many law enforcement agencies across the state in supporting the 1 in 4 Mainers living with mental health challenges. In our work, we have collaborated closely with the Maine State Police. We respect their compassion and dedication in attempting to support the members of their communities struggling with mental health crises daily. We have also been steadfast in advocating to ensure that critical mental health services receive the necessary funding to sustain the services within the community mental health system. Due to ongoing discussions regarding the limited budget and the state's difficult fiscal position, we cannot support law enforcement in obtaining necessary funding that could be utilized in communities that have seen significant funding cuts. As our community mental health system continues to be underfunded, the onus of responsibility has shifted to law enforcement. By providing state police with mental health funding, we are continuing to cost-shift the mental health burden to the criminal justice system, increasing the likelihood of individuals becoming entrenched in the system. Additionally, the individuals interacting with the existing behavioral health providers within state police have dwindling community resources to be referred to.

Currently, there are roughly 2,500 sworn law enforcement officers in the state, with recent information revealing that York, Franklin, Oxford, Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Knox, Waldo, Androscoggin, and Northern Cumberland Counties have a total of 30 crisis workers, with 17 providing mobile crisis services, 8 providing triage services, and 6 per diem workers. With the state shortfall in the budgets, every dollar counts. The state police request for the funding has pure intentions; however, it should be determined by best practice and evidence-based programs such as community crisis services and Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics.

Old stereotypes and stigma continue to persist in our culture that someone experiencing a mental health crisis is a criminal matter. The statistics tell us that an individual with a severe and persistent mental illness is 11 times more likely to be the victim of a crime than to perpetrate one. Yet when someone is struggling with their illness, we send law enforcement to respond. This furthers the narrative that individuals with mental health challenges are dangerous. I commend all departments taking steps to ensure that they provide mental health services as an alternative to law enforcement. However, I am concerned that we are at a point that has shifted responsibility, treatment, and funding away from our community mental health system.

NAMI Maine worries about the burden we are placing on law enforcement, asking them to assume responsibility for the shortcomings of the underfunded community mental health system. We ask the committee consider why our criminal justice system needs to request funding to address deficiencies in the mental health system and what message this is sending our neighbors that the police are being asked to assume responsibility for medical conditions. We ask that you vote in opposition to funding additional behavioral health providers in the state police and instead, look towards evidence-based and national best practice services that research has demonstrated have the highest impact on diverting individuals from the criminal justice system.

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.

LEGISLATIVE CONTACT

Hannah Longley, LCSW, Director of Advocacy and
Crisis Intervention
(207) 622-5767 ○ HannahL@namimaine.org

POSITIONS & POLICY AGENDA

www.namimaine.org/advocacy