



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1440
TTY: (207) 287-4469

Joseph F. Underwood

290 Skyway Street, Lot 11
Presque Isle, ME 04769
Residence: (207) 762-4921
Joseph.underwood@legislature.maine.gov

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, I am Representative Joseph Underwood serving House District 5, which contains all of Presque Isle in Aroostook County.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of my bill LD 298, *An Act to Employ Mental Health Personnel within the Maine State Police*

I come before you today as a Representative from rural Aroostook County. This is an area that exemplifies the challenges facing Maine's criminal justice system when it comes to mental health support. It is no secret that we are in the midst of a mental health crisis, one that does not discriminate between urban and rural communities. However, in the far reaches of Maine, where access to care is already sparse, the lack of mental health professionals is particularly dire.

This is especially evident within our law enforcement and corrections systems. Too often, our state police, sheriffs, and local officers are forced to act as frontline mental health responders. The truth is, that we do not have enough mental health personnel embedded within our public safety infrastructure to effectively meet the needs of those in an active mental health crisis.

LD 298 is a necessary step toward addressing this gap. By employing dedicated mental health personnel within the Maine State Police, we ensure that law enforcement officers are better supported and that individuals struggling with mental illness receive the care and coordination they desperately need.

In rural Maine, the shortage of mental health professionals is well documented. According to the U.S. Health & Human Resources & Services Administration, nearly every county in Maine is designated as a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA). This shortage is particularly severe in Aroostook, Washington, Piscataquis, and Somerset Counties. For many individuals in these areas, accessing care requires hours of travel- if they can access it at all. I urge the committee to support LD 298 and help us take this crucial step toward improving mental health support within our criminal justice system.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joseph F. Underwood".

Joseph F. Underwood
State Representative