

Good afternoon Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My Name is Nick Loscocco.

I come before you today in support of LD 110. I am a person in recovery from Opioid use disorder, a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor here in Maine, and a board member and advocate with Maine Recovery Action Project.

Although I was very lucky to make it out of my experience with opiate use disorder alive, I've had more loved ones than I can count who were not so lucky. My hometown in Massachusetts, as well as my new community here in Maine, have been devastated by the illegal targeting and distribution of opioids to our most vulnerable citizens. These settlement funds are the blood money for these crimes. This is our, The People's money. We deserve a voice in how it is spent, and we deserve a way to verify and hold accountable our public servants responsible for these funds' allocation.

When these funds started flowing a couple years ago, I felt compelled to get involved and learn all I could about this process so that I could put my best foot forward in my advocacy efforts. I read the Maine statutes relating to the distribution of funds and makeup of the Maine Recovery Council, I studied the Memorandum of Understanding and the research published by John's Hopkins on this matter, and I dove in to working on making sure I could do all in my capacity to ensure these once-in-a lifetime resources were allocated according to the peoples' wishes.

I am going to quickly go over two areas of experience I've had with tracking down, and advocating for the beneficial use of these funds since then. First was an effort at ME-RAP to identify how any already received funds may have been allocated throughout the state.

Using the spreadsheet being maintained by AG Frey's office of ACTUAL settlement distributions to date, advocates got to work tracking down if any of the funds had been spent by the subdivisions, and if so, how. Members of our network divided up the subdivisions between us, and got to work reaching out to city counselors, town managers, county commissioners, and many others. This went on for a couple of months and we discovered a few things:

1. There was no uniformity in spending, gathering community input, or reporting
2. There was little knowledge and a wide range of "opinions" of what "should" be done with the funds despite ample evidence-based practices and interventions having already been studied and proposed by John's Hopkins and many other experts in the field.
3. Many subdivisions were not directly consulting with their communities for input on spending decisions
4. There was no standard for reporting receipt nor expenditure of OSF

That last one made it very difficult for our group to accomplish what we set out to do. How could we help advocate for our vision of "opioid abatement" if we could not even hold public officials accountable to their expenditures of these funds? We realized that in order to make sure these funds are appropriately spent, we needed easily accessible and transparent reporting on spending. And so, here we are.

My other area of experience in this matter is as a counselor and treatment navigator in Lincoln County. Despite not having any standard for transparency, a number of community partners in Lincoln County were able to leverage our relationships with folks such as our sheriff, county administrator, and the County Commissioners to develop a plan and advocate for local expenditures that the community thought could have the largest impact. Our efforts there culminated in a County RFP, proposals, and allocations by the Commissioners to a number of community organizations already doing incredible work within the county. The most recent of these expenditures were just determined within the last couple of weeks. Without the efforts of myself, and my community partners in Lincoln County to first find out if and how any money had already been spent, it would have been very difficult to advocate for appropriate uses of the funds. A standard of transparent reporting would have made our efforts exponentially easier. It will likewise make our efforts easier moving forward.

Although we were successful in having our voices heard there, and our Sheriff and commissioners have been excellent partners in our efforts, there is still no easily accessible reporting of the expenditures. Digging through county commission meeting minutes going back months or years to find the answers I might be looking for is very time consuming and often feels futile. Likewise, the knowledge and time necessary to file FOAA requests are not luxuries everyone in our communities have.

Opponents to this legislation may make points about how their budgeting processes are already accessible. They may say "it's in our commission meeting minutes," or "all you have to do is ask." Again, "asking" or seeking information through the FOAA is not something everyone can do, nor is digging through county or municipal meeting records. Further, these funds result from specific harms and are intended for specific uses. They are not "normal" municipal or county budget items. Therefore, their expenditure necessitates a specific reporting and transparency requirement. Indeed, the people who were victimized and who suffered for these settlements to come to pass deserve AT LEAST an easy way to find out how their money is being spent.

Others may express a concern for potentially increased administrative burden were this bill to become law. Frankly, any minor additional administrative burden pales in comparison to the burden of loss endured to get this money, and the lives that can be saved with it when the people it belongs to have a voice and knowledge as to its usage. Also, I personally know how at least Lincoln County has spent their money because I've worked for 2 years advocating for it, and I alone could make a spreadsheet for their spending in 20 minutes, so the administrative burden concern is really a non-issue.

I realize you have a very busy legislative schedule, and I appreciate your time on this matter. On behalf of those we have lost to Opioid Use Disorder and overdose, I urge you to help make our efforts easier, and vote "ought to pass" on this bill.

Sincerely,

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