



Testimony **In Support** of LD 882 – An Act to Protect Communication with Providers of Critical Incident Stress Management Peer Support

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, my name is Joe Kellner of Windham, and I am the chief executive officer of LifeFlight of Maine - statewide not-for profit critical care air ambulance service. I am a licensed paramedic and have worked in Emergency Medical Services in Maine for over 20 years and have experience with nearly every delivery model of EMS that we have here. In addition, I spent seven years serving on the Board of Emergency Medical Services, including two years as its chair, and participated in both Blue-Ribbon Commission studies on Emergency Medical Services in Maine.

During my career in EMS, I have received news of the suicides of an accomplished flight paramedic, a beloved fire chief, a skilled and friendly dispatcher, and a bright young EMT. Later, the daughter of the flight paramedic, also working in public safety, would take her own life. Broadening the circle, I can think of several more across public safety in Maine. I personally responded to a colleague who had attempted suicide and was very close to someone who made an attempt to end their life. Everyone in this room who works, or has worked, in public safety knows well that their colleagues are at a dramatically higher risk of not only suicide (39% higher than the general population), but also post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use, relationship troubles, and of course career burnout.

At LifeFlight, my primary job is the safety of our staff. Part of that safety includes their mental and emotional well-being. We have hired a dedicated mental health clinician, who is available to any of our staff, for any reason, at no cost. We are in the process of developing a robust peer support program to provide peer-to-peer support to our staff to help them cope with the trauma they see every day that they work.

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As we built out our peer support program, and through partnership with the Vermont Center for Provider Wellness, we identified a gap in the protections for peer support activities in Maine Law. Peer supporters have very little protection, in current law, against having to testify against their peers should the need ever arise, and further, while limited confidentially protections are afforded, cannot provide the level of protection to their peers that is necessary to earn the trust necessary to truly open up.

This bill, with the updated proposed language, prevents a peer supporter from having to testify against their peers, and further, protects anyone participating in debriefs from having to testify against each other.

It is my opinion that these steps and changes are critical to create the necessary environment to support the mental health and safety of our teams, who every day are exposed to things many of us cannot imagine. **We must create an environment where responders can be comfortable discussing their challenges openly versus being disincentivized to do so.**

Help me honor the legacy of Carl, Laura, Jimmy, Isaac, Owen, and so many more who, perhaps had the supports been in place, the outcome may have been different, through supporting this legislation.

Thank you also to Representative Salisbury and the cosponsors for bringing this forward and thank you to this committee for your support.

