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**Testimony of Senator Harold “Trey” Stewart  
Presenting L.D. 1422, An Act to Strengthen Laws Protecting Members of Law  
Enforcement and Promote In-classroom Drug Use Avoidance Education  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety  
May 12, 2021**

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety committee: I am Senator Trey Stewart and I have the honor of representing 51 communities in Aroostook and Penobscot counties. I am before you today to present L.D. 1422, An Act to Strengthen Laws Protecting Members of Law Enforcement and Promote In-classroom Drug Use Avoidance Education.

Over the last fourteen months the Maine Center for Disease Control, Governor Mills’ office, and news outlets across the state have actively reported on the number of COVID-19 cases and related deaths. Meanwhile, they have been virtually silent in respect to overdose deaths; where in Maine we had a record breaking 502 deaths in 2020, up from 380 in 2019.

The Governor created an Opioid Response position within her office and issued Executive Order 2 on February 6, 2019 with actions “intended to reduce overdose deaths, expand treatment and recovery efforts and begin a focus on prevention,” as is stated on her website. Unfortunately based on the increased numbers of overdose-related deaths, it seems that these actions have taken a backseat to the COVID-19 pandemic, which please don’t be mistaken, I feel is also a very serious matter.

With the steep increase in overdose deaths, dramatically impacting families across the State of Maine, I think it is important that we make every effort we can to educate our youth on the harms associated with drugs use. For that reason, I am bringing forward this legislation which includes an annual appropriation of \$1,000,000 for the Department of Education for the funding of programs that educate Maine youth against drug use. As a member of the statewide Opioid Task Force that was formed in 2017, we prioritized education as a major component in the “prevention” leg of the three-legged-stool- approach we used to strategize our response to the crisis. Making a significant investment in this effort with the state’s financial support and “putting our money where our mouth is” will finally make good on this priority.

Additionally, we have seen a major decrease over the last several years in the number of people applying to join the law enforcement ranks. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the Police Executive Research Forum, 63 percent of police departments said they had seen fewer applicants

than just five years prior. The reality is fewer people want to go into a profession where they may not make it home to their loved ones at the end of the shift, and they are constantly under fire for the actions of their colleagues in other parts of the country who represent a stark minority in the profession. While there are most regrettably, a few terrible people who have mistreated their rank and given the profession a black eye, I think it is important that we, as leaders in our state, continue to support the honorable men and women in law enforcement who joined the ranks to serve and protect those in their community.

In addition to adding funding for programs educating against drug use, this legislation also extends the application of the hate crime sentencing laws to a defendant who selects the person against whom a crime is committed based on that individual's employment as law enforcement – or who selects property to damage owned by a member of law enforcement specifically because they are a member of law enforcement. Law enforcement was another prong of the Opioid Task Force's work in 2017. This initiative will help ensure that we have the necessary support within the profession that they can focus on keeping our communities safe and drug-free, rather than ensuring that they have enough manpower to barely cover every shift.

It's critical to mention the third prong of the recommendations of the Opioid Task Force as well-treatment for individuals suffering from addiction. While not within the jurisdiction of this committee, be assured that there are efforts underway in other committees of the legislature to ensure that individuals struggling with addiction in Maine have resources they need to win their battle and survive so they can live out their lives as survivors, rather than statistics of the crisis.

I appreciate the committee's support of this important legislation, which will help to address two critical components of the opioid crisis our state is facing and aid in the protection of Maine people. I'm happy to answer any questions the committee may have at this time.