5.14.21

Hello Representative Pluecker and esteemed members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Evie Clement and I am a current resident of Old Town, Maine and I am testifying in support of LD 1588. I am a drug policy research fellow at the University of Maine studying stigma and language as they relate to policy reform and the availability of treatment for substance use disorder. The following views are my own and do not represent the fellowship, UMaine, or the UMaine system.

The powerful force of stigma creates barriers for people who use drugs, people who are incarcerated, people with mental health conditions, and many other populations. These barriers may be to treatment, housing, employment, or many other critical services that should be available equitably to everyone. Stigma contributes to these barriers and stigmatizing language sits at the root of them, reinforcing negative connotations and often untrue stereotypes.

To help counter this, person first language is recommended by experts in many fields. The goal is to help break these ingrained patterns and associations, allowing us to make a conscious effort to define someone as a human first, rather than define them by a condition they may have or a circumstance they may experience.

In the case of drug related language, the idea that substance use disorder is a medical condition and should be treated as such is widely agreed upon, but language choices such as "addict", "junkie", etc. may contradict this. Alternative language, such as "person with substance use disorder" frames substance use disorder as a medical condition that can be treated rather than a hopeless result of moral failure.

Language not only reflects biases and internalized stereotypes, but also has the power to shape the way we approach larger social issues. Research indicates that individuals hold more negative attitudes toward the term "substance abuser" than "person with substance use disorder". If we refer to people as "addicts" and think about them as "addicts" rather than people with the capability of recovery, we are less likely to see their humanity and work to help them.

The words we choose to use shape our thoughts, which in turn shape our actions. Drug policy experts emphasize the importance of language in portraying issues accurately, breaking stigma, and supporting recovery. Language is an underrated tool that we have no reason not to use in order to help recognize the humanity in others. This bill will show that Maine's language reflects our knowledge about these issues and help set a precedent to see issues more compassionately. I strongly urge you to think about the power of language in shaping our reality and support this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

This is a relatively simple adjustment, but it's impacts should not be underestimated. Especially in our Maine statutes. Hopefully this will be a general cultural shift as well

Language constitutes our reality, creates unconscious biases, etc. etc. etc.

Studies about how language impacts the way we think

If it impacts the way we think, it will impact the way we treat people, make policy, help or don't help people, etc.

We say we want to help people but if we continue to dehumanize them, it may sound like lip service

Let's take a basic step and set an example for recognizing humanity and shifting our perceptions to have more compassion.

As the name suggests, it puts the person first.