

February 9, 2022

Dear Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and members of the Criminal Justice & Public Safety Committee,

My name is Rebecca Bass and I live in Portland. I am an organizer with Maine Recovery Advocacy Project (ME-RAP) and I am a person in long-term recovery who has abstained from substance use for nearly five years. I moved to Maine in 2017, and I have found great comfort and love in the recovery community here. I have also experienced deep pain from our losses.

I am testifying in favor of LD 1862: An Act To Strengthen Maine's Good Samaritan Laws Concerning Drug-related Medical Assistance. Since I joined ME-RAP last June, I have been especially aware of the overdose deaths in the recovery community, and I have felt firsthand how the frequency of the deaths and the fact that they were preventable weigh on us. We are desperately trying to make change that will save our friends, and we are constantly met with resistance from those in power. Not all those in power – but certainly as many as it takes to slow down the progress and let people continue to die.

LD 1862 will be a step in the right direction, and I believe it will quickly save lives once it expands the protections from arrest under Maine's Good Samaritan Law. We should be making it as easy as possible to get medical attention when someone is experiencing an overdose. Nothing—I repeat, nothing—should stand between someone experiencing a medical emergency and life-saving treatment. Not fear of arrest, not fear of harassment, not fear of judgment. The fact that our laws currently prioritize punishment over human life is reprehensible.

I have included the Maine Voices column I wrote below. It was published in The Portland Press Herald on January 27, 2022. I hope the Legislature will choose compassion and expand the Good Samaritan Law for the sake of all Mainers. Our state is grieving and tired.

Sincerely,
Rebecca Bass
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Link to op-ed: <https://www.pressherald.com/2022/01/27/maine-voices-we-cannot-leave-overdose-survival-to-chance-expand-maines-good-samaritan-law/>

Maine Voices: We can't leave overdose survival to chance – expand Maine's Good Samaritan law

By Rebecca Bass

I consider myself to be extremely lucky.

About four years ago, I fell in love at first sight. I imagine many people did the same when they met this guy. He was handsome, charming, smart, the works. How lucky was I that our paths had crossed?

Soon, by more dumb luck, we were both in love and inseparable and picturing our future together and doing all of those flowery things. Eventually, we broke up and learned our lessons and drew some boundaries and did all of those depressing things. But throughout it all, I felt so lucky to be close with this complicated, hilarious, frustrating, brilliant person.

He died of an overdose in 2020. Any pain I'd felt before then pales in comparison to what I've felt since. I've learned that when you lose someone you love, grief rips out your organs one by one, breaks all your bones and flattens your body with a steamroller. Then, it lurks, lying in wait while you repair yourself, so that it can destroy you all over again.

In the days following his death, I reached out to one of his closest friends from when we were together. We shared memories of him and caught each other up on our lives. She told me she would have me over for dinner once her kitchen renovations were finished. A few months later, before she and I had the chance to do dinner, she died of an overdose, too. Grief steamrolled me again.

And still, I am lucky, because I only have two of these stories. I've only lost the chance to laugh at inside jokes, sing in the car and talk trash with two wonderful people in my life.

So many Mainers have lost more. In 2021, an estimated 636 people died of overdoses in Maine, a 23 percent increase from 2020's 515. I'm fortunate to have experienced only a tiny fraction of our state's grief over the past two years.

I don't say that I'm lucky to minimize my loss. I say it because it's an absolutely absurd thing to say and I'm trying to get your attention.

The number of people someone has lost to overdose is not determined by luck. That death toll is determined by policies that criminalize drug use, leading to a deadlier drug supply and a deep fear of seeking treatment. It's determined by a community's access to harm reduction services and affordable mental health care. It's determined by the officials we elect and the laws they pass. In other words, it's determined by things that we, as a society, can control.

In fact, our state Legislature is currently considering passing L.D. 1862. The legislation – An Act To Strengthen Maine's Good Samaritan Laws Concerning Drug-related Medical Assistance – is sponsored by Sen. Chloe Maxmin and co-sponsored by Sens. Matthew Pouliot and Marianne Moore and Reps. Lydia Crafts, Raegan LaRochelle, David McCrea and Charlotte Warren. If I just listed your lawmaker(s), thank them.

Maine's current Good Samaritan Law protects from arrest only the person who called for help at the scene of an overdose and the person overdosing. The expanded law would shield

everyone at the scene from arrest or prosecution for all nonviolent crimes and violations of probation and bail conditions. These protections ensure that no one has to weigh getting emergency medical help against risking interaction with law enforcement, which could completely upend the lives of everyone present.

As it stands now, the fear of arrest and incarceration is keeping people from calling 911, possibly up to 75 percent of the time. So what happens to the people who are overdosing?

Does it depend how lucky they are? Or how lucky their loved ones are?

We cannot leave overdose survival to chance. We must urge our legislators to pass L.D. 1862 to save lives and keep grief from tearing more Mainers apart.