

Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
c/o Deborah Fahy
State House, Room 436
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: LD 1862

Good Morning Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, and Senator Maxxim.

My name is Kristin Lash. I am a resident voter in Portland in long-term recovery with an extensive background in health and community care as a muscular therapist and birthworker. I am here to testify in support of LD 1862 because no one deserves to die a preventable death or survive an overdose only to be saddled with fear and facing criminal charges.

I recently earned my MSW and was fortunate to intern with Maine People's Alliance and the PATH program at The Opportunity Alliance. I am not speaking today for The Opportunity Alliance although I will share from my experience as an intern working alongside our unhoused community members because they need the expanded protections provided by LD 1862. I have experienced the loss of childhood, adult friends, and people I worked with as a massage therapist. At this point with over 50 Mainers a month - 12 individuals a week, two people a day - dying preventable deaths, the line between personal and professional is a moot point. The overdose epidemic is impacting all of us, and we all have a responsibility to respond and protect our neighbors.

In September 2021, I was in the right place at the right time and attended to an overdose reversal. Two residents of a temporary emergency hotel shelter came into the lobby, panicked and hesitating before asking for Narcan. I rushed to get a dose from my bag, handed it off, and ran down the hallway. Another resident passed me a second dose as someone let me in the room. The friends had administered the Narcan and I knelt beside the individual, speaking to them while I rubbed my knuckles against their sternum. Asking a friend to hold their head, I began to share my breath.

A massage therapy mentor of mine once said that in our work we are witnesses to a person's life story as experienced by their body. All of their joys, pains, and hopes are held in our hands and through touch, we possibly bridge the isolating gaps of the human experience. A harm reduction advocate and fellow birthworker, whom I also consider a teacher, shared that our ability to hear is the sense that stays with us the longest. When we respond to an overdose, we enter into a sacred space and possible life transition. Our words, touch, and presence matter. They always matter.

I remember being abnormally calm as I spoke to them, their friends, and continued to share my breath. COVID? It didn't even cross my mind. The possibility of death? Absolutely but it was followed by a litany of other outcomes: law enforcement will likely be involved; housing will likely be revoked with bans enforced at other temporary emergency shelters; individuals will be forced back outside, increasing the risk of a second, fatal overdose because that is what happens in the absence of proper aftercare and when people are disconnected from their community and they use alone. Yes, I knew I had a second dose, a finite amount of time to call 911, and I knew about the Good Samaritan Law but I had witnessed and heard stories telling a different reality. I hoped like hell the Narcan and my breath would be enough.

Their ask for help and the group response that day was enough. I stayed to provide aftercare and shared information with the friends remaining in the room because, despite stuffing my agency lanyard down my shirt, my presence was becoming unsettling. I told them it would be okay and they were safe, and eventually, I left feeling like I told a lie and failed them because no one could reassure me they would be protected and not lose their housing.

Maine is one of 47 states along with the District of Columbia to enact a Good Samaritan Law and studies show a decrease in overdose-related deaths when individuals are aware of its protections and feel safe calling for help. That is not the reality many Mainers are experiencing. Help is equated with harm because the current law and practices are not enough. We cannot afford the continued loss of life as a result. We need life-affirming laws that respect, value and protect our community members regardless of their choice to use substances, housing status, and life experiences. LD 1862 offers more robust protections and ensures all individuals involved and present at an overdose feel safe when calling 911.

No one deserves to die a preventable death. No one deserves to die because they use substances. And, no one deserves to survive an overdose only to face criminal penalties, stigma, or increased isolation and separation from their communities.

I ask that you vote “ought to pass” on LD 1862. We need to show up better and be present for our friends, loved ones, and neighbors in reducing harm, avoiding preventable deaths, and protecting our community members and their futures.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.

Kristin Lash
MSW, MT, Birthworker
Portland, Maine