

Testimony in Support of LD 1862

Good morning Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren , and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Genevieve Lysen, I am a person in long term recovery, and I am a Senior Organizer for the Maine People's Alliance. Our 32,000 members stretch from Kittery to Fort Kent. We are committed to creating a state of Maine where everyone has what they need, everyone contributes what they can, and no one is left behind.

I am pleased to testify today in favor of LD 1862, An Act To Strengthen Maine's Good Samaritan Laws Concerning Drug-related Medical Assistance.

Last year we lost 636 Mainers to preventable overdose. That is over twelve Mainers every single week. Those were our sisters, brothers, co-workers, neighbors, parents, and children.

They could have still been with us today if they were able to get help. The current Good Samaritan Law, while well intended, is limited in scope. The threat of criminal penalties continue to instill fear in individuals at the scene of an overdose, which leads to countless preventable deaths.

Like so many families in our state, my life has been touched by the overdose crisis. My cousin Samuel Johnson, died last August alone in his home. We grew up together here in Lewiston. He was 34 years old. Like I do, Sam struggled with depression issues, substance use disorder, and though he worked so hard on his recovery, he couldn't find the help or belonging he needed to thrive. Sam's experiences over the years with the courts and law enforcement made him feel worthless, like a criminal, when he just needed help and love. When Sam died he was 4 years into recovery and re-establishing a close, loving relationship with his son, Milo: who was his whole world. Sam had so much life and love to contribute, and I see his death as completely senseless. Harsh drug policies killed Sam, not the drugs themselves. I can't help but think about how Sam was likely using with a friend that day at this apartment, who was afraid to call authorities that could have saved Sam's life. We need far more compassionate drug policies, like the expansion of the GoodSam protections.

If our goal is to save lives, we need to remove the obstacle of fear that prevents people from calling 911. Doing so is not condoning possession or other nonviolent offense; it is saying that saving lives is the most important thing, is our overarching goal. Until we are able to meet people where they are and save the lives that we can, we will continue to see countless preventable deaths.

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