



April 8, 2021

Senator Sanborn, Representative Tepler, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services: my name is Alysia Melnick and I'm here on behalf of EqualityMaine, the statewide LGBTQ civil rights organization.

EqualityMaine supports LD 1115: An Act To Improve Access to HIV Prevention Medications. We'd like to thank Senator Sanborn for her leadership on this bill.

This bill is about expanding coverage and access to PrEP and PEP, so a bit of background info on what they are would probably be helpful: PrEP is the shorthand way to say pre-exposure prophylaxis. PrEP is an HIV prevention strategy where HIV-negative individuals take a single pill once a day; the medication works to prevent HIV from establishing infection inside the body. Similarly, PEP is the shorthand way to say post-exposure prophylaxis, and is a 28-day regimen used in specific instances following high-risk exposure to prevent HIV infection.

Truvada, the first PrEP drug, was approved by the FDA in 2012. Since then, studies have shown that PrEP can reduce the risk for HIV infection by up to 99% when taken consistently.

In just the last two years, there have been several new significant developments: In October 2019, the FDA approved a second drug, Descovy, for PrEP. Then, in December 2019, the Trump administration announced a new program called "Ready, Set, PrEP" with a goal of distributing enough free PrEP to cover an additional 200,000 people per year for the next 11 years. Finally, in October of 2020, a generic version of PrEP came online.

With the scientific consensus that PrEP works to prevent new HIV infections, and bipartisan leadership working to promote this medication, you may be wondering "What's the problem?" As is often the case, the answer is insurance coverage and access.

The issue of insurance coverage may be the easier one to address: due to Affordable Care Act regulations and recent action by the U.S. Preventative Services Task Force, most private

insurance plans must cover PrEP with no cost sharing starting in 2021. Our colleagues at GLAD articulate this in greater detail in their testimony, and we support their suggestion that this bill be amended to conform with the federal requirement of no cost sharing.

The issue of access is more challenging and will require multiple strategies over time to get this critical medication to those who need it. The bill before you proposes one such strategy: allowing pharmacists to dispense small supplies over-the-counter.

A few key points on this: first, pharmacists would not be required to participate. But if they choose to do so, they would be required to complete a training program approved by the Board of Pharmacy to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to be able to counsel Mainers on use of the medication. Second, because pharmacists would be limited to dispensing a short-term supply, an ongoing prescription for PrEP would still require contact with a primary care provider. We view this as a critical element because it would both address the immediate short-term medication needs, but also ensure a patient's ongoing health care needs are addressed.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has now been raging in the United States for more than 40 years. We have lost far too many people way too soon, and far too many new cases are still diagnosed each year. Because it is 99% effective at preventing new infections, PrEP is the kind of game-changer that can help us end this crisis.

The Trump and Biden administrations both have taken action on PrEP, and last year this committee and the Maine Legislature took action too, when you passed our first PrEP bill by bipartisan supermajorities in both the House and Senate. We ask you to take the next step by supporting this bill.

EqualityMaine was founded in 1984 following the tragic murder of Charlie Howard, a young man who was thrown off a bridge in Bangor just because he was gay. We have been advocating on behalf of Maine's LGBTQ community for 37 years, and we have more than 70,000 members across the state of Maine.