

Aspen Ruhlin
Mabel Wadsworth Center
LD 2075

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Public Testimony for LD 2075
An Act to Protect Health Care Workers from HIV
Testimony in Opposition

My name is Aspen Ruhlin, and I am providing this testimony on behalf of Mabel Wadsworth Center. First, I would like to thank the chairs Representative Perry and Senator Bailey, along with the rest of the Committee on Health Care Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services. As many of you may know, Mabel Wadsworth Center is a feminist sexual and reproductive health center in Bangor. Along with our expertise as sexual health providers, I myself have significant professional experience around HIV specifically, as in a previous phase of my career I held the title “Northern Maine HIV, STD, and Hepatitis C Community Outreach Coordinator.” In this role, I received training from the Maine CDC on best practices for providing these testing services and counseling those seeking said services. I also worked a syringe exchange handling contaminated sharps, and provided trainings for healthcare providers across the state on both PrEP and PEP. I feel that knowing this background is important to understanding the stance of Mabel Wadsworth Center that LD 2075 ought not to pass.

While treatment, testing, and prevention have radically improved since the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis, stigma persists. Many sex ed courses incorrectly still frame HIV as a death sentence, though I know people living with HIV who have not only had the virus but been undetectable, meaning they can not transmit HIV to others, longer than I have been alive. People can live long, meaningful lives with HIV, and effective prevention methods are essential. While I do not agree with the method, I recognize that this is the root of this bill—prevention.

This bill seeks to remove required consents to HIV testing in limited circumstances in the case of a healthcare provider experiencing an accidental needlestick from a used sharp. The goal of this is to circumvent the need for PEP, or Post Exposure Prophylaxis. For committee members who are unfamiliar with PEP, it is an effective and safe medication taken after a potential or confirmed HIV exposure to prevent the individual from contracting HIV. It’s taken for a month, and in the majority of cases, side effects are non-existent or minimal, contrary to when PEP first began to be used.

A negative HIV test does not mean that someone does not have HIV. When someone is exposed to HIV and contracts it, it takes time for that to accurately show up on a test. While a nucleic acid test gives us the earliest accurate result at 10-33 days of testing for the presence of the virus, an individual can be transmissible before the test comes up reactive. This is why PEP is such an important prevention tool for those who work in healthcare. Removing consents to HIV testing will not make healthcare workers safer, but will simply give those who do not specialize in HIV a false sense of security and result in not accessing PEP.

For these reasons, Mabel Wadsworth Center asks that you vote ought not to pass on LD 2075. Thank you for your time, and I’m happy to take questions.