

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, Esq.

LD 118 – Ought to Pass

An Act To Address Maine's Shortage of Behavioral Health Services for Minors

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

February 11, 2020

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, good morning. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions through advocacy, education, and litigation. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support LD 118. This bill would help Maine take a small but crucial step toward healing for young people who struggle with behavioral health challenges.

This bill would change two things in our current system. First, it would require hospitals to submit certain data about extended youth stays to the Department of Health and Human Services (“DHHS”). Second, it would require DHHS to make an annual report about that data and propose solutions. Both of these changes are necessary to divert youth away from our criminal legal system, where untreated behavioral health problems play an outsized role.

According to perhaps the most rigorous study about juvenile justice ever conducted in Maine, well over half of incarcerated youth have a recent history of mental or behavioral illness.¹ 69% of youth currently committed in Long Creek received behavioral health services through MaineCare the year before they were committed.² 71% of that group received the most

¹ Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment & Reinvestment Task Force Report at 9, available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/de726780/files/uploaded/Maine%20Juvenile%20Justice%20System%20Assessment%20FINAL%20REPORT%202-25-20.pdf>; see generally Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment & Reinvestment Task Force, Website, available at www.mainejjtaskforce.org/about. The taskforce was created by the 129th Legislature’s LD 1108, which is available at <http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0812&item=1&snum=129>.

² Task Force Report at 9.

intensive form of behavioral health services.³ For too many Maine children, the juvenile justice system has become the default provider of behavioral and mental health services. And yet, correctional officers are not mental health service providers. To remedy this problem, the task force recommended strengthening the continuum of community health programs.

This bill would help do just that by strengthening our knowledge of what happens upstream, before a young person gets involved in our criminal legal system. These reforms are modest, commonsense, and long overdue. We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.

³ *Id.* at 107.