

# M.C.C.A.

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## LD 475, Resolve, To Create the Frequent Users System Engagement Collaborative

March 24, 2021

Chair Claxton, Chair Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Stephen Gorden and in addition to serving as chair of the board of commissioners for Cumberland County, I am writing today in my role as board president of the Maine County Commissioners Association. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee in support of LD 475.

**About MCCA.** Briefly, the Maine County Commissioners Association was founded in 1890 to assist Maine’s county government in providing vital services to Maine citizens in a responsive, efficient, and credible manner. The Association is based in Augusta and currently represents 15 of Maine’s 16 counties and is governed by a board with representation from each participating county.

**Our position on LD 475.** As we understand it, the goal of this legislation is to form a “collaborative,” chaired by the Maine State Housing Authority, to develop a plan to provide stable housing and community services to 200 persons who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and who are the most frequent consumers of high-cost services, such as psychiatric hospitals, emergency shelters, emergency rooms, police, jails and prisons. We believe this makes sense.

By way of background, a key mission of counties in Maine is law enforcement and the incarceration of certain individuals in county jails, including those awaiting trial or who have been convicted of offenses with sentences less than 9 months. This law enforcement and corrections function comprises nearly half of all county budgets, and under current state law, many counties are at or nearly at the maximum amount they are allowed to spend on their jails.

At the same time, we have observed that our jails are increasingly populated by individuals who have pre-existing mental health or behavioral health challenges, including substance use disorder – in fact, nearly 70% of all inmates receive some form of psychotropic medication while in jail. Likewise, poverty and homelessness are significant root causes of incarceration. More and more, county jails have become the treatment option of last resort for too many Mainers.

For this reason, our Association strongly believes that mental health and poverty services intervention must occur before individuals engage in criminal behavior and are incarcerated. Such investments do cost money, but far less than the costs associated with processing an individual through our criminal justice system, and far less than the economic cost of trying to employ individuals with a criminal record.

**Testimony of MCCA in support of LD 475**

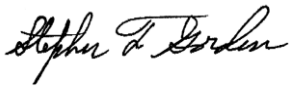
**March 24, 2021**

**Page 2**

LD 475 is positive because it seeks to address homelessness by utilizing a targeted approach, directing additional services to this cohort of 200 people who are the most frequent users of high-cost services. This approach will hopefully help individuals get back on their feet and stay out of the criminal justice system. Over the long term, this should help bring down costs for the state, county, and municipal governments tasked with providing these services.

**Conclusion.** We hope this information is helpful to the Committee as it considers LD 475, and we hope the Committee will see fit to give this bill an “ought to pass” report.

Respectfully submitted,



Stephen Gorden  
President

cc: Commissioner Brian Hobart, Chair, MCCA Legislative Committee  
James I. Cohen, Verrill Dana, LLP, MCCA Legislative Counsel