

April 6th, 2021

Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Michelle Cote, and I am a caseworker at Preble Street Teen Services. Preble Street is a human services anti-poverty agency with over a dozen programs and services provided across the state. I am testifying on behalf of Preble Street in support of LD 1059: An Act to Provide Substance Use Disorder Treatment to Adolescents.

I have firsthand experience working with youth who struggle with substance use disorder and barriers to services caused by homelessness. Youth substance use is dynamic in nature, and there are multiple deep-rooted reasonings behind the need to use substances. Often times our youth have experienced trauma and neglect, and in return this has impacted their own mental health. This trauma can lead to using substances as an attempt to relieve the pain of their experiences. Substances provide an immediate sensation of relief, but this is not sustainable in overall wellbeing.

At the Teen Center, we welcome all with open arms, love, and support regardless of their past histories or current use of substances. We, as caseworkers, will support clients by connecting them to the limited and dwindling resources available, but that is not enough.

While there have been many occurrences, I can recall one moment in particular where if there had been more access to resources for people using substances, the trajectory of a young woman's life may have been different. This person was one of my first clients, and she was a bright and resourceful person who longed for a solution to her addiction to heroin. She would come to me in moments of panic and pain, expressing a need for a detox bed and residential rehab. We would call the local detox center, but unfortunately there were no detox beds available. She would sit in my office in physical pain due to withdrawal, shaking and hunched over. We would, for the next three months throughout the summer, call every detox center and residential rehab throughout New England. Again, there was no availability for someone without private insurance and the financial means to get help. This financial barrier to accessing services marginalizes a large group of people who are expressing their need for help. To this day, I don't know what happened to this young woman. After months of roadblocks and "no beds", she left the state. Not a lot of people know the sincere disappointment of having to tell someone asking for help "there are no resources right now." It will always be the most challenging part of the job.

As a society, we clearly know the impact substances have had on our communities, our friends, and our families. Ensuring accessibility to resources is a key part of early intervention. It is imperative to have resources available to youth who are using substances, so they can start to break down barriers to move forward with a healthy, sustainable life. It is a personal worry of mine that if there is not enough funding for programmatic development geared specifically for youth substance use, then we will see a drastic increase in youth homelessness. In the long run, this would be more costly than early intervention. For this reason, Preble Street urges you to vote in support of this bill and ensure that youth experiencing homelessness and substance use disorder can access much needed treatment and support. Thank you for your time.