



Testimony of Whitney A. Parrish

LD 1135 - Ought To Pass

An Act Regarding Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services and Increasing Reimbursement Rates for Those Services

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

April 6, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Whitney Parrish, and I am the Advocacy and Communications Director of Health Equity Alliance (HEAL). Health Equity Alliance is a nonpartisan nonprofit public health and harm reduction organization that envisions and works toward a world where all people are valued and celebrated, and health justice is realized for everyone, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or what their lives look like. HEAL has service providing offices in Bangor, Belfast, Calais, Ellsworth, Machias, and Rockland, and works on advocacy issues related to drug use statewide.

I am writing today in support of LD 1135, *An Act Regarding Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services and Increasing Reimbursement Rates for Those Services*, because **all Mainers who experience problematic drug use or live with a substance use disorder (SUD) deserve a robust system of sustainable, high quality, and varied treatment options**. HEAL believes LD 1135 will begin to bolster this system during a time when we need it more than ever.

Maine saw its deadliest year for overdose deaths in 2020.¹ Despite our best efforts as harm reductionists and providers of services like naloxone distribution, sterile syringe distribution, and wraparound services like targeted case management, HEAL watched our clients struggle like never before. We did, and continue to do, our best to connect our clients to resources, and many individuals do access treatment through their connection to programs like ours. It is not enough when we don't have options, though, especially in rural Maine where many of our counties are designated as health care deserts. And it should be noted: despite Maine's record number of overdose deaths, this is a longstanding issue that did not begin in 2020.

¹ Office of the Maine Attorney General. Attorney General Releases Drug Death Report for Third Quarter of 2020. 2021. <https://www.maine.gov/ag/news/article.shtml?id=3933388>



We believe an important step in solving this crisis is attracting providers to Maine and supporting them once they are here. We also need to support the ones we have right now. Increasing the reimbursement rate for substance use outpatient services by 25% will begin to do just that. Monthly reports from the Office of the Maine Attorney General are already indicating that the 2021 death rate could surpass that of 2020, and we cannot afford to wait any longer in supporting and growing options for people who have problematic relationships with drugs or live with substance use disorders.

As you know, we are not just talking about death rates. We are talking about people—our parents, our children, our loved ones, our coworkers, our neighbors, our community members. We owe it to them, and any person who finds themselves in need of support, the best treatment possible, as well as options to find the best fit for them.

It is not enough just to have one or two service providing groups from which to choose, and this is an issue we encounter all over Maine and especially in rural areas. If a service is not a good fit, or someone has a poor experience, we believe people should have other options, including other treatment modalities, available. We meet too many people who leave treatment because of a negative history with a provider or a different type of treatment need. Methadone might not work for everyone. Suboxone might not either. The same is increasingly true for abstinence-based services. Increasing reimbursement rates will increase options and allow for better, and more sustained, outcomes for individuals seeking outpatient substance use treatment.

We cannot wait any longer. As we reform our criminal legal system to better reflect a public health response to problematic drug use, we must keep up with support on the health care side of this issue. We are grateful to Representative Stover for the introduction of this incredibly important legislation and urge the committee to vote '**Ought To Pass**' on LD 1135.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.