

Sarah Juster
East Blue Hill

Dear Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Sarah Juster and I am a resident of East Blue Hill. I am here today to testify in favor of LD 488 and the expansion of recovery community organizations throughout Maine.

We know now that 2020 has been the deadliest year in Maine in the ongoing opioid epidemic, with 502 drug overdose deaths representing a 25% increase over drug overdose deaths in 2019. We also know that COVID-19 has exacerbated social isolation for all Mainers, including those struggling with substance use disorder, and that social isolation is a risk factor for increased substance use.

I am currently earning my Master's degree in social work through the University of Maine, where I am also a member of the Professional Opioid Workforce Response program. Through my social work lens, I have come to understand that individual well-being is inextricably linked to the social environment. Individuals with substance use disorder-- one of the most stigmatized conditions in our society-- are often at a loss for finding safe, community spaces to supplement psychosocial or medical interventions. And yet, such recovery community centers and peer-led recovery supports are considered evidence-based in that they have reliably demonstrated positive effects on recovery outcomes.

Since 2017, Maine has taken strong steps to support the formation of recovery community recovery centers across the state. Thirteen recovery community centers currently exist across nine counties, and in 2020 alone, these centers have been able to provide 6,837 peer-led activities to 55,067 individuals (add TRS/membership numbers). These astounding numbers demonstrate the depth of the void that recovery community centers are trying to fill. Although 13 centers are a major achievement, seven Maine counties do not have this vital support.

I know that it is a tough year to ask for funding. And yet, we cannot ignore the costs to our state of unaddressed substance use disorder in terms of emergency medical care, incarceration, work productivity, and child welfare. It is more important now than ever that we fund the evidence-based responses that work, such as recovery community organizations, to ensure that people in recovery have access to connection and healing in the wake of such a hard year.

Thank you for your consideration and I am happy to answer any questions.