



**Testimony of Dr. Kimberly Perreault
Medical Director of Emergency Services
Southern Maine Health Care
In Support of LD 1740**

**“Resolve, Regarding Reimbursement for Providing Inpatient Care to Individuals
with Acute Mental Health Care Needs”
April 27, 2021**

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Dr. Kim Perreault, Medical Director of Emergency Services at Southern Maine Health Care, and I am here to testify in support of LD 1740.

Mental health patients deserve high quality, timely care. Patients with mental health conditions are waiting hours, if not days, in emergency departments across the nation. Maine is no exception. We need better funding and support for inpatient treatment. The number of patients with acute mental health conditions requiring admission increases year over year, yet the entire mental health system, including inpatient beds, remain underfunded. And the pandemic has exacerbated the problems even further.

Nearly every day we have multiple mental health patients languishing in our Emergency Departments while the mental health crisis team works tirelessly trying to find inpatient beds for them. These patients range in age from young children to older adults. The acuity and severity of illness ranges from the patient seeking self-help to an out of control patient who is combative and injuring himself and other people. All of these patients need and deserve our help. We provide adequate funding for patients with chest pain, pneumonia, congestive heart failure, diabetes, etc. Why are patients with mental health conditions different? They are equally, if not more ill.

Over my career, I have seen the acuity and length of stay for patients with mental illness increase. More patients are waiting longer in the ED, which is an environment not conducive to long-term care and recovery. In fact, in FY '20, the average wait time in our EDs for an adult waiting for a psychiatric bed was 48 hours – which was one of the key factors driving the development of the new units in Sanford that are the subject of today's hearing.

The accumulation of patients presents demands on both physical space and staffing. A number of times this past year we have seen over 50% of the ED beds occupied by mental health patients waiting for inpatient beds. This means not only are the mental health patients waiting, but patients presenting with other medical conditions are waiting longer to be seen by a provider.

Long ED stays for patients with mental illness impact patients and staff in other ways. Unfortunately, the impact can be tragic. ED staff are all too frequently verbally and physically



threatened by patients in an acute psychiatric crisis while awaiting bed placement. Unfortunately, with increased numbers of mental health patients boarding in the ED, these threatening interactions affect not only staff but patients as well. EDs are not well-designed to meet the needs of patients with behavioral health issues, and, in fact, the often hectic environment can exacerbate a mental health crisis. Medical patients have seen the physically and verbally aggressive behaviors towards staff. We recently had a pediatric patient who was in the hallway awaiting a medical evaluation be told she was going to die by a patient who was walking back to their room as they waited for a psychiatric bed.

The solution is multifaceted and includes improved access to outpatient services and inpatient beds, and the funding to support that access. And the situation that I mentioned makes clear the importance of the ED in Sanford that was created to better meet the needs of patients with mental illness. The expanded capacity that has opened in Sanford is already making a difference, but increased support is needed to allow the units to reach maximum capacity. Maine Behavioral Healthcare and Southern Maine Health Care have committed significant financial and human resources for individuals with behavioral health needs. I am asking the State of Maine to support these efforts and do what is in the best interest of all of its citizens, including those with mental health conditions by providing a rate reflects the cost of these inpatient beds.

Thank you for your time and attention, and I would be happy to answer questions.