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Testimony of Rep. Sam Zager in support of

LD 1392 An Act Directing the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention to Release Annually Public Health Data Regarding Certain Fatalities and Hospitalizations

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

April 29, 2021

Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and esteemed colleagues on Health and Human Services. For the record, I am Representative Sam Zager of District 41 in Portland. I am pleased to speak in favor of this bill as a co-sponsor.

LD 1392 proposes to amend Title 22, Section 20, which defines the scope of the CDC Director's annual report. Statute already requires the director to report to this committee on "Challenges and threats to the health of the residents of the State." This bill would add public health data concerning firearm fatalities to that scope.

I submit that anything that has the potential to kill a Mainer qualifies as a "threat to health," whether it be a novel coronavirus, tobacco use, hypertension, or a firearm.

Some people might say, "Wait a minute! Guns don't kill people; people do." The same could be said of motor vehicles. And when we applied a public health lens and public health interventions in this country decades ago, motor vehicle deaths dropped. By a lot.

For the first seven decades or so after the Ford Model T was introduced in 1908, there was an awareness that we in this country were suffering increased numbers of motor vehicle deaths. We didn't know the details, though, and for all people knew, it was a known hazard that couldn't be mitigated. And even if it hypothetically could be mitigated, wouldn't mitigation punish law-abiding motorists who were simply exercising their rights?

By the 1970s, tens of thousands of Americans were dying on the roads, and enough people supposed that something *could* be done about it without infringing on rights. In 1975 the U.S.

government started *collecting and reporting data* -- just as proposed in LD 1392. The numbers were indeed sobering: 44,525 American deaths in 1975 rising to 51,000 per year by the decade's end.¹ For reference, that's nearly as high as the total Americans deaths in the entire Vietnam War.

Then in the 1980s, public health interventions, such as raising awareness about drunk driving, helped turn the tide.² Deaths precipitously dropped, per capita, per miles traveled, and in absolute terms. Without curtailing anyone's vehicular rights, there were 36% fewer traffic deaths in 2014 (32,744) than the high-water mark 35 years earlier (51,093). Thirty-six percent fewer deaths. As awful as *any* motor vehicle death is, this decrease represented an incredible public health success.

Which of us, our loved ones, our constituents, or other Mainers would not be here today if this *public health* effort was not mounted? I'm sure glad we saw past any concerns about the technical feasibility of collecting such data back then.

So, here we are in 2021 with a firearm fatality rate over three times that of Massachusetts.³ I believe we *can* do something about it, while preserving people's rights. We can apply a public health lens and pass LD 1392.

Thank you for your consideration. I'd be happy to take questions.

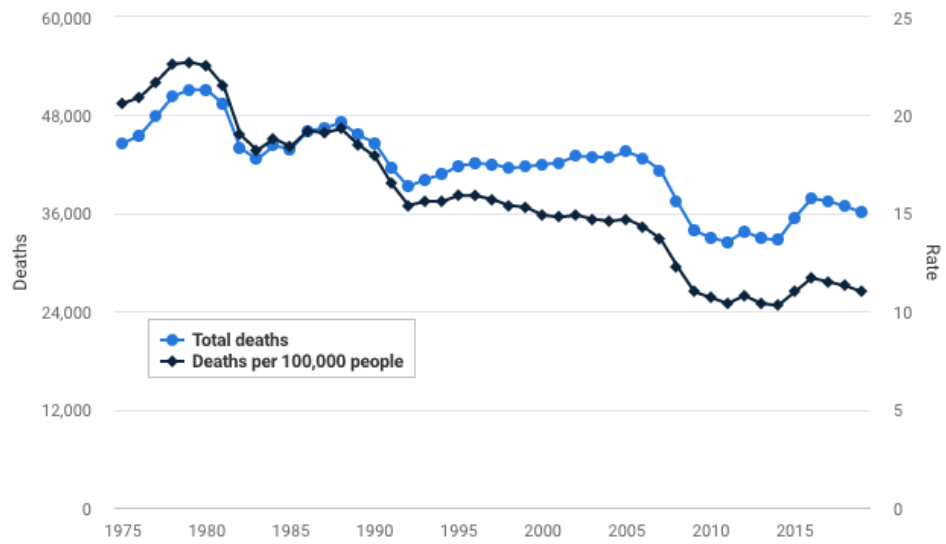
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¹ Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. <https://www.iihs.org/topics/fatality-statistics/detail/yearly-snapshot>

² Kathryn Stewart and colleagues at Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) studied the reasons for the drop in traffic deaths starting in the 1980s. <https://druglibrary.net/schaffer/MISC/driving/s18p6.htm>

³ https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm

Motor vehicle crash deaths and deaths per 100,000 people, 1975-2019



Incidentally, the very same pattern occurred in Maine.⁴

⁴ <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2002/rpt/2002-r-0516.htm>