

Jessica LeBlanc  
Sweetser

Testimony in Support of LD 1586: An Act To Strengthen Statewide Mental Health Peer Support, Crisis Intervention Mobile Response and Crisis Stabilization Unit Services and To Allow E-9-1-1 To Dispatch Using the Crisis System  
May 3, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the joint standing committee on Health and Human Services: thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 1586. My name is Jessica LeBlanc (LCSW) and I am the Director of Crisis Services for Sweetser, a not-for-profit, behavioral health organization. Throughout my many years working for Sweetser, I have had the opportunity to collaborate, consult, and teach crisis intervention training to law enforcement agencies throughout Maine (York, Cumberland, Androscoggin, Waldo, Knox, Lincoln and Sagadahoc).

This bill calls for support in strengthening the existing mental health crisis intervention mobile response services, in part, to include the addition of mental health liaisons for law enforcement agencies and mental health professionals with crisis services at E-9-1-1 dispatch centers. I will speak to the positive impact of law enforcement and mental health provider collaborations.

When individuals experience a mental health crisis, many who have experienced trauma, the need for assessment and intervention in the least restrictive, home/community setting is vital to their recovery. Taking them out a familiar and supportive setting can cause further distress and trauma. Officers respond to an overwhelming amount of calls for individuals suffering from mental health symptoms and navigating an every-changing and complicated mental health system is a hardship that taxes their valuable resources. Individuals in crisis need the support of mental health providers to stabilize. Law enforcement and mental health provider partnerships create opportunities for education and the exchange of information that allows dispatchers to better identify when a mental health response may be needed and improves officers ability to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use disorders. This collaboration also facilitates connecting individuals to appropriate treatment and diverts them from unnecessary emergency department visits and incarceration.

A consistent relationship between law enforcement and community crisis increases and improves pro-active responses to individual's experiencing severe and persistent mental health symptoms in the community. As officers gain greater insight and knowledge of resources they also acquire increased aptitude to identify needs and provide support to individuals that they encounter prior to them ever reaching the point of crisis. I have been a part of pro-active community responses with law enforcement where individuals suffering with mental health symptoms have had positive life-changing interventions that could have resulted in premature death. Pro-active community responses not only saves lives, but it reduces cost to individuals and systems. More than seventy percent of all people we see in crisis services do not require the use of emergency departments. Additionally, having crisis response services available to provide information, intervention, and facilitate connection to resources relieves law enforcement to be available to attend to other community needs.

Positive steps have been made to provide increased mental health training to law enforcement agencies across the state as well as efforts to develop formal and informal collaborative partnerships between law enforcement and mental health providers; however, further development and sustainability requires further support. Thank you for your time and consideration.