

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, Esq.

LD 1915 – Ought to Pass

**An Act To Improve Intensive Behavioral Health
and Public Safety Case Management Services**

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

February 3, 2022

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, good morning. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions through advocacy, education, and litigation. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support LD 1915, which would help Maine reduce its reliance on the criminal legal system to solve healthcare challenges.

Maine and every other state in the union rely excessively on prisons and police to solve challenges better suited to our healthcare, housing, and educational systems. White Mainers have suffered as a result, but nonwhite Mainers, poor Mainers, and Mainers with disabilities have suffered most acutely. The only viable way to solve this serious problem is to divest from our failed criminal legal systems and invest in systems designed to meet people's needs.

Intensive case management is part of this puzzle of reinvestment. A large proportion of the people arrested and incarcerated in Maine, and shot to death by law enforcement, suffer from mental and behavioral health disorders. A recent report from Maine's Deadly Force Review Panel found that of ten case studies of people shot by police, "90% were in mental health crisis and/or suicidal."¹ As of 2016, "Between 30 and 61 percent of Maine's

¹ *2nd Annual Report of the Deadly Force Review Panel*, Submitted to the Joint Standing Committee on the Judiciary, at 6, Jan. 2022, available at <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/7969>

1,774 county jail inmates were prescribed at least one psychiatric medication,” and “About a third of the 2,223 inmates in state prisons were taking drugs to manage their mental illness.”² If the status quo continues, more people will lose their life and liberty because Maine lacks adequate healthcare services.

We lack these services partly because pay rates for intensive case management and other mental health supports are not updated often enough to reflect the value of the work in today’s dollars. Sometimes it is over a decade before rates are increased. The inflation rate between 2011 and today is 18.9 percent. That means that people are being paid less for the same demanding work. Given these dynamics, it is no surprise that we do not have enough people to staff the programs and services that our friends and neighbors so desperately need.

The bill before you would help turn Maine into a state that heals and treats illnesses rather than one that criminalizes them. This is a necessary component of reducing the harmful impact of our criminal legal system. We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.

² Nok-Noi Ricker, From hospitals to jails: How Maine’s mentally ill are still institutionalized, BDN, Feb. 2016, available at bangordailynews.com/2016/02/20/news/from-hospitals-to-jails-how-maines-mentally-ill-are-still-institutionalized/