



Testimony of Whitney A. Parrish

LD 1034 - Ought To Pass

An Act To Provide Funding to Support the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial Indigenous, and Maine Tribal Populations

Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

April 14, 2021

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government:

My name is Whitney Parrish, and I am the Advocacy and Communications Director of Health Equity Alliance (HEAL). Health Equity Alliance is a nonpartisan nonprofit public health and harm reduction organization that envisions and works toward a world where all people are valued and celebrated, and health justice is realized for everyone, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or what their lives look like.

Racism in Maine is a real, persistent, and too often unaddressed issue. We see evidence of it in health care disparities, like the disproportionate number of Black and African American Mainers who were and still are impacted by COVID-19.¹ We see it play out in access to housing and employment. We see it play out aggressively in our criminal legal system, where racial disproportionality is especially pronounced, especially in drug offense arrests.² I mention this because of HEAL's work with people throughout Maine who use or are impacted by drugs. We see it in what began as a legacy of forceful displacement and brutalization of Indigenous residents by European colonizers, eventually becoming a system of institutionalized oppression and second-class citizenship for the very people—the Wabanaki people—whose land we stand upon today. And the racism we see in the state has direct impact on people's health, livelihoods, and wellbeing. We must make meaningful, consequential action to address the problem.

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations was established in 2019 to research and address disparities in opportunities and outcomes for historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous and tribal populations in the state. As an independent government entity, the Commission is empowered to initiate and conduct studies, advise both the legislature and the Governor's office, hold public hearings, and submit meaningful legislation addressing the very issues you are hearing about today. By holding this authority, the Commission allows access to government that might otherwise be unavailable to underrepresented populations.

In its first year of operation, the Commission reviewed hundreds of bills and issued important recommendations to the legislature. Many of these important recommendations were integrated into legislation last year, prior to the abrupt adjournment necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of

¹ Maine Has Nation's Worst COVID-19 Racial Disparity. 2020. <https://www.pressherald.com/2020/06/21/maine-has-nations-worst-covid-19-racial-disparity/>

² The Council of State Governments Justice Center. Justice Reinvestment in Maine. Dec. 2019.



these bills have now been reintroduced in the current session. The Commission's work has already had a significant and meaningful impact, and continuing their work is vital.

This legislation will provide the Permanent Commission with the funds that are needed to begin to adequately staff the Commission. The Commission has thus far operated with a combination of very limited administrative support, additional temporary staff support, and one-time funding of \$50,000. The Commission, and this effort to address the racial disparities in the state, require a more realistic commitment from us in order to carry out the work. Funding from this bill will allow the Commission to hire a Director and administrative staff who will coordinate commission meetings, conduct research, organize and hold public hearings, and raise funds for special initiatives.

As an organization working to support Mainers in realizing health justice, we know health justice is not achievable without racial justice. They are one in the same. Without the work of the Commission, and without this additional funding, the Commission's work will remain incomplete. It will be yet another unfulfilled promise by well-intentioned lawmakers to address the artifice of racism, without providing the critical means by which to do the real, hard, and consequential work.

The time has come to do more than just talk about racism in Maine. We believe you and the Legislature have the opportunity to do something very tangible and meaningful here, **and to back up your stated commitment with the resources necessary to see that promise through to fruition.** We respectfully urge the committee to vote 'Ought To Pass' on LD 1034.

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