

FRANNIE PEABODY CENTER

Comprehensive HIV & AIDS Services

Testimony for Public Hearing
Health and Human Services Committee
January 17, 2018

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LD 1707 - An Act To Reduce the Cost of Care Resulting from Blood-borne Infectious Diseases

Good Morning Committee Members. My name is Caitlin Eldridge. I am here to ask you to support LD 1707, An Act To Reduce the Cost of Care Resulting from Blood-borne Infectious Diseases. I was born and raised in Ellsworth, went to college in Lewiston, and now live and work in Portland. I have seen the devastating impact of the opioid epidemic in my personal and professional life, so I speak to you today as a service provider and a concerned life-long Mainer.

Currently, I am the Director of Operations and Client Services at Frannie Peabody Center in Portland. Frannie Peabody Center is Maine's oldest and largest HIV/AIDS service organization. We provide housing resources, case management, behavioral health, and HIV testing and prevention services. And up until October 1, 2017, we offered syringe exchange services in Lewiston-Auburn.

Frannie Peabody Center's mission is to prevent the spread of HIV and to provide support for those living with HIV/AIDS in Maine. Our agency has not always offered syringe exchange services, but as the opioid crisis emerged, we knew that we had to act in order to remain true to our guiding principles of harm reduction. HIV and Hepatitis C are commonly spread through shared injection equipment like syringes, and it is our job to protect against those threats to public health. We applied for licensure through Maine CDC and initially partnered with a substance use treatment provider in Auburn to operate our program.

It didn't take us long to realize that the need for safe injection supplies was far beyond what we would be able to support financially. Our development staff worked tirelessly to gather support from private funders, but without state funds we worried that we would not be able to sustain these life-saving services. This financial barrier led us to a partnership with a different provider in Lewiston, where we were generously supported by a corporation that shared our commitment to harm reduction.

Even then, the need was great and our capacity was limited. We found ourselves serving as a band-aid on a hemorrhage. With no financial support from the state for supplies or staffing, our program was not sustainable even with the generous support of a partner. When our corporate partner made the necessary decision to relocate to

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Auburn, we were unable to continue to sustain the cost of operating the program even though we knew that it was critical to our mission.

Thus began the heartbreaking work of stepping away from a life-saving service that the people of Maine need and deserve.

There are many forces working against us here, including social isolation, shame, economic distress, and stigma around people who inject drugs. I am here today to ask you to be a force for good. The State of Maine is enduring an unacceptable loss of life, and funding syringe exchange services is a logical tool to prevent those losses.

- Syringe exchange services are proven to mitigate the spread of HIV, Hepatitis, and other infectious diseases. Investing in syringe exchange is extremely cost effective, saving hundreds of thousands of dollars in lifetime medical costs for each HIV or Hepatitis C infection averted. (National Minority AIDS Council)
- Contrary to popular belief, syringe exchange services do not enable addiction. Instead, they provide an avenue for people to engage in testing and treatment when they are ready. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10171413>)
- Supporting this funding will show that the State of Maine values each and every one of its citizens and is willing to act to save their lives.

I offer this testimony not to win your sympathy or tug at your heartstrings, but rather to appeal to your common sense in the interest of public health for the people of Maine. In the midst of a crisis that is so profoundly horrifying, it is easy to feel powerless. But we are not. Your support of this bill will ensure that our state's response to the opioid crisis is more than thoughts and prayers. Funding syringe exchange is a tactical, evidence-based, financially responsible intervention. It is time to put our money where our mouth is and fund these life-saving services.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Caitlin Henderson Eldridge, LMSW

Frannie Peabody Center