



**Sagadahoc County
Sheriff's Office**

**Joel A. Merry, Sheriff
Brett Strout, Chief Deputy**

752 High Street, Bath, Maine 04530
Telephone (207)443-8529 Fax (207)443-8224

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Senator Craven, Representative Farnsworth and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Joel Merry, and I am Sheriff of Sagadahoc County. I am here today to speak in support of LD-1066. I have been in law enforcement for 30 years and have served as Sheriff for a little over four years. You might wonder why I am here today speaking about this bill, and it is because I see the importance of health care coverage as a vital community-wide benefit. A benefit that can prevent crime and violence, and at the same time save our criminal justice system time and money.

Extending health care coverage to 138% of the Federal Poverty Line is a good thing because it provides people with access to affordable health care, including mental health and substance abuse services, which is good for the well-being of individuals that need these services, communities, and law enforcement. With this expanded coverage under the Affordable Care Act, the number of those helped will certainly include many men and women who suffer from substance abuse or mental illness who cycle through our county jails and state correction system. With proper implementation, these individuals will gain access to mental health services and treatment that can reduce their propensity to commit crimes.

Expanded coverage will enable people suffering from mental health and addiction issues to move from crisis to stability and to maintain that stability through continuity of coverage, thereby reducing recidivism, which in turn will allow them to participate in and contribute to their communities. Currently, law enforcement agencies all over the state are spending a significant amount of resources responding to calls involving people in crisis or suffering from addiction.

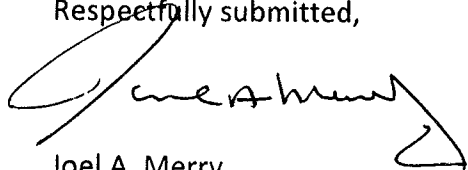
It has been said that our county jails are the largest mental health institute in the state. And while we are focusing on re-entry services, we see the lack of insurance coverage as a significant barrier to putting together a comprehensive plan that will help the individual from re-offending. A recent study conducted by Volunteers of America Northern New England at the Two Bridges Regional Jail Re-entry Program found 70% of inmates were identified as having substance abuse challenges, and 46% had mental health challenges, yet only 30% were identified as having health care coverage.

When an inmate can be put on an intensive outpatient program, or even in-patient care at a hospital, they have a better chance of overcoming their addiction and thus reducing their chances of re-offending. The same can be said for adults in need of community based mental health services. By extending coverage to 138% FPL, 100% of this cost will be paid by the federal government for the first three years and then slowly declining to 90% by 2020. This will relieve jails of significant expenses.

Finally, increasing health care coverage will allow more individuals to access services to screen for and treat mental health issues. Every day our police officers are responding to calls involving citizens with mental illness who do not have insurance and are not meaningfully connected with behavioral health services, often times because they cannot pay for and access benefits. This can be corrected with a push toward primary care with behavioral health integration. Individuals can be connected to services and supported in their treatment programs.

While this will not entirely solve the problems associated with mental illness and substance abuse, it will allow us to do a better job than we are doing now. Assuring individuals have access to mental health coverage is vitally important to maintaining their health and well-being and keeping our communities safe.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel A. Merry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Joel A. Merry
Sheriff