



MUUSAN

MAINE

Unitarian Universalist
State Advocacy Network

PO Box 8, Augusta, ME 04330
admin@muusan.org

April 28, 2021

Thank you Representatives Anne Perry, Heidi Brooks, Rachel Talbot Ross, Charlotte Warren, Senator Stacey Brenner and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee for bringing this bill forward.

My name is Naneen Chace-Ortiz and I speak on behalf of the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network (MUUSAN) from a faith tradition that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person and seeks justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

For almost 20 years, our denomination has advocated for decriminalization of drug use and incarceration of drug users only when they commit actual crimes such as assault or vandalism or impaired driving¹. MUUSAN supports LD 967 as it allows for a humane and public health-informed response to people caught in possession of scheduled drugs for personal use.

Maine has a drug overdose death rate of 30 per 100,000 people² and we had 380 deaths in the first three quarters of 2020 which is equal to the total in all of 2019³. Decades of experience have shown we cannot arrest and punish our way out of substance use and overdose deaths. LD 967 focuses on one practical step that can and should be taken to avoid many of the harms that flow from punitive drug laws and to instead promote proven, effective health-based interventions.

We need to change our drug laws to save lives. I also speak as a nurse who understands that the medical needs of all people who have a substance use disorder need to be met. Opioid addiction is a public health crisis, and every bit as much an illness as cancer, diabetes or alcoholism. Decriminalization is an essential step to remove barriers to care and support, reduce stigma and discrimination, improve health and socioeconomic outcomes, and work toward a more just and compassionate society. We must stop treating people affected by substance use disorders as criminals instead of patients. We need a humane and public health-informed response to ensure people stay alive and have the best opportunity to lead thriving lives.

Treatment and prevention are the pathways to defeating this problem, not stigmatizing its victims with felony convictions which will follow them for the rest of their lives, affecting their ability to find jobs, health insurance, housing, family support, and often leading to relapse into the very addiction that produced the conviction in the first place. Discriminatory enforcement of drug possession laws has produced profound racial and ethnic disparities at all levels of the criminal justice system⁴.

Thank you for your time and I urge you to pass this bill that would end criminal penalties for minor drug possession and offer people a pathway to recovery.

Naneen Chace-Ortiz, MSN, RN.

1. Alternatives to the "War on Drugs" 2002 Statement of Conscience. Unitarian Universalist Association. July 1, 2002.
<https://www.uua.org/action/statements/alternatives-war-drugs>
2. National Center for Health Statistics - Maine. March 17, 2021 <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/maine/me.htm>
3. Attorney General Releases Drug Death Report for Third Quarter of 2020. January 11, 2021.
<https://www.maine.gov/ag/news/article.shtml?id=3933388>
4. Drug Policy Alliance. "It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession" July 2017.
<https://drugpolicy.org/resource/its-time-us-decriminalize-drug-use-and-possession>