



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Testimony of Rep. Lucas Lanigan In Support of LD 1975 ***“An Act To Implement a Statewide Public Health Response to Substance Use and Amend the Laws Governing Controlled Substances”***

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

I am Representative Lucas Lanigan, representing District 141, including the towns of Newfield, Shapleigh, and parts of Sanford and Springvale. Today, I am here to express my support for LD 1975, An Act to Implement a Statewide Public Health Response to Substance Use and Amend the Laws Governing Scheduled Drugs.

Today, I am hoping to speak directly to my Republican colleagues. I understand that some of you may think this bill is excessive, costly, and perhaps even impractical. I used to share those sentiments before a life-altering event shifted my perspective. It's easy to dismiss such proposals when they seem detached from our own lives. I know because I was once in that position.

I believed some measures were too extreme, costs too high, and that individuals should bear the responsibility for their choices. However, my viewpoint drastically changed when addiction hit home and I found myself navigating a complex web of challenges that required immediate attention. Today, I am sharing my story not to elicit sympathy but to offer a different lens through which to view this bill. Before my personal encounter with the devastating consequences of substance use disorder, I too thought certain initiatives were excessive. I implore you to consider my experience as a cautionary tale—a narrative of a family that once held similar reservations until those reservations were shattered by the impact of addiction. None of us are immune to the far-reaching consequences of addiction, and it is my sincere hope that, by hearing my story, my Republican colleagues can reconsider their stance before a similar tragedy hits closer to home. Let us approach this issue with empathy, understanding, and a shared commitment to finding effective solutions that can save lives and strengthen our communities.

While public figures often keep their private lives private, I believe it is crucial to share stories that shed light on the challenges many families face. My wife initially expressed concerns about sharing personal information, citing potential judgment. However, I firmly believe that societal change begins with openly sharing our stories.

As I began talking to more families, I discovered that we were not alone; quite the opposite. Many families are trying to navigate the same path we were, except they find themselves hiding in the shadows of embarrassment and pain. This bill encompasses many facets towards the road to recovery. I believe that, as a society, we often view substance use disorder as a choice or even a lifestyle. We may think that these are choices individuals make, and unless they want help, it is not our problem. Trust me; I once believed that. Everything changed for me one fall day.

It is weird how you remember certain things but can't recall what you ate yesterday. My wife and I were at Thornton Academy watching my youngest son's football game when my phone rang. It was Alex, and as I answered his call, he proceeded to tell me he was addicted to Heroin. We had suspected some drug abuse, but we never imagined the words "addicted to Heroin" would be uttered. From that day forward, our lives, as well as his, would never be the same.

The first step was admitting to using, and from there, we sought to find him a detox center. Unable to find one that accepted insurance, tapping into our savings became our only option. After 7 days of detox, our son was escorted to a plane, boarding a flight to a 45-day rehab in Florida. About 25 days in, we received a call that he had left the facility and was somewhere on the streets of Clearwater.

He was far from home, alone, and felt he needed his family's support to maintain his path. We flew him back, and he entered another local program using sober housing and intensive outpatient programming (IOP). While at the sober house, he was unable to work and felt the burden on us was too great, convincing his mother to let him return home.

Two weeks after returning, he overdosed at her house, which fortunately did not require Narcan. On Christmas Eve, we were asked to allow him to join our family Christmas party, as his mother did not want him home alone while she was out of town. I was hesitant, knowing he was using, but we allowed him to come. That evening, he seemed normal, upbeat, and talkative. Little did I know that he was high. Around 9 that evening, I noticed frequent trips to the bathroom and a complete change in demeanor.

He was trying to sleep downstairs, but I asked him to come lay down in the room next to ours while we finished wrapping Christmas gifts. I did not like the way he looked, and as I stood in the doorway watching every breath, he began hardly breathing, and his lips turned from a natural red to a deathly purple. At this point, I called my wife, who is medically trained. She pulled our son's lifeless body onto the floor, started CPR, and asked me for Narcan and to call 911.

Paramedics arrived within 3-4 minutes, and by that time, he had just woken up, staring into his stepmother's eyes with a look of total despair. Once he arrived at the hospital, Christmas Day had just begun. I called into the ER to ask what services would be available to help him. The answer I received was mind-boggling at the time, but now I understand why. **I was told that unless he was an immediate danger to himself or others, he would not qualify for any mental health services, and they did not provide**

any addiction services. I asked them to stall and leave him under their care until I could find some sort of care for him.

Luckily, we had the means (barely) to scrounge together \$5000 on some credit cards and find a detox center in Portland that would take him. Once we secured his spot, I spoke with the staff to let them know what was happening. His doctor asked if he had any drugs on him, and Alex admitted there was a bag of Heroin in the pocket of his wallet. The doctor confiscated it, and I can only imagine how many victims of this epidemic do not have the means and support to get the help that Alex did - that's what this bill is about and why the services are free of cost to everyone.

Going home, reusing, and families finding their loved ones deceased after going to sleep is a grim reality for many. We were not only fortunate but lucky. After detox, he underwent another IOP and returned to my house to live. Thinking he had quit using, he decided to move away from the area, only to become more entrenched in his addiction. Returning home two months later after living in his car, he found himself with no one willing to allow him to continue his reckless lifestyle while living among his family. Being shut out, he continued to live on the streets of Portsmouth NH until Halloween night of 2022.

That night, he decided to call me for help. I hadn't spoken to him in 8 months, and I had been waiting for a call from the police stating he had overdosed and had passed away. Hearing his broken voice was a relief. I picked him up with the understanding that he was not using and was willing to get checked into a shelter. Having two younger siblings at our house, we did not allow him to stay with us. After staying at my warehouse for three days on a couch while waiting for a shelter bed to open, my wife asked if he could return home, as a shelter was not the place our child should end up.

That evening, as he got settled, we went to bed thinking he had been clean. When we were awoken by his hand on our feet, shaking us to help him, he had just taken the rest of his Heroin and swallowed a fistful of Advil and Tylenol, attempting to take his own life. We immediately called 911, and he was rushed to the ER.

This is where you will see what we are asking for today in this bill will make the difference in so many Mainers' families' lives. Now suicidal, he was finally able to receive the treatment he needed. No addiction, regardless of what it is, comes without a form of mental illness. He was admitted to Southern Maine's Mental Health ward and was able to detox and seek attention for his mental illness stemming from childhood traumas left unaddressed.

Alex went through two weeks of intensive inpatient therapy and treatment, receiving referrals to mental health doctors and prescriptions aimed at keeping him off drugs. From there, he was released to my care, where every morning, I would administer his Suboxone, and he would log into his virtual IOP services. He was not in a place where he could work, maintain his therapy, or even cope with small tasks we normally take for granted on a daily basis.

Without this support from both his family, his doctors, and Alex's commitment, he would most definitely have fallen back into his addiction, as that would have been a much easier path. Most people lack these crucial supports in their recovery. As a state, we have made the entry level back to society so tough that we continue to see failure more often than

success. It took at least 2-3 months of everyday support until Alex was mentally and emotionally strong enough to reenter society.

Sometimes we forget that this is not an overnight fix. There is no magic wand, and results are not immediate. It took Alex receiving all the services I mentioned, plus a Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) program that included therapy alongside medicine. Today, I am proud to say that his journey has brought him to enjoy 14 months of sobriety and has returned my son to us from the grips of addiction. He works, pays taxes, and is a productive member of society.

We have a choice to make. We can either continue to bury our heads in the sand or invest in the future of so many tormented with addiction and mental health problems. We can invest now, or we will pay later. It really is that simple.

Before our journey towards his recovery, I would not have believed there was a solution. Today, I stand before all of you to tell you there is.

Unlike many families, we did not have to say a final goodbye to an amazing young man. Today, I am proud to say that, even though it was not easy, I am glad my eyes were opened, and I realized there is a path forward for our loved ones who are suffering from the lack of resources.

I ask that you strongly consider LD 1975 from a Dad, from his brothers, and from so many people who care about Alex and many others like him. I urge the committee, especially my Republican colleagues, to stand with me in supporting LD 1975. Let us invest in the future of those struggling with addiction and mental health issues. Changing long-held opinions is challenging, but if I can do it, so can others. Please join me in voting "ought to pass" on this bill.