

**Opening Statement**  
**Senator Susan M. Collins**  
**“Addressing Disparities in Life Expectancy”**  
**July 21, 2021**

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. This is an extraordinarily important hearing that you are holding today, and I appreciate your convening it. The pandemic and its consequences have exacerbated many of the problems that were already fueling declines in life expectancy. Just this morning, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that U.S. life expectancy fell by 1.5 years in 2020. That is the biggest decline in generations, and the largest drop was among Hispanic men. One of the clearest consequences of the pandemic is the escalating incidence of behavioral health problems and substance abuse disorders.

Overdose deaths have soared by 30 percent during the pandemic. Last year, 504 Mainers died from overdoses, a tragic record that exceeded the deaths caused by COVID-19 in 2020. Let me say that again: more Mainers died from drug overdoses last year than died from the tragic pandemic. Regrettably, 2021 may be even worse, as Maine has averaged nearly 50 overdose deaths a month so far this year. Like Americans of all ages, young adults had a tough time coping with the pandemic, the lockdowns, and other consequences, and they reported much higher levels of anxiety. In a CDC survey conducted last summer among young people aged 18 to 24, nearly a quarter reported that they had started or increased their abuse of substances to cope with pandemic-related stress or emotions. The survey also revealed that 25 percent seriously considered suicide.

Many who have struggled with the chronic illness of addiction long before the pandemic found it more difficult to access the treatment they needed to participate in counseling and peer-to-peer support during the pandemic. As young adults start to become parents themselves, the stakes have become infinitely higher. In Maine, about 8 percent of babies born in 2018 had some degree of neonatal abstinence syndrome. This summer alone, a three-year-old from Old Town died and an 11-month-old from Corinna suffered a near-fatal fentanyl overdose.

In 2017, the *Portland Press Herald* ran a 10-part series titled "Loss: Heroin's Killer Grip on Maine's People," and one of the installations in the series focused on women and the challenges that they face. The article said that when it comes to opioids, women are at a deadly disadvantage. They are dying of overdoses at increasing rates compared with men. They get addicted faster and feel withdrawal more acutely. They are often dealing with sexual trauma as well as their addiction. They tend to avoid seeking treatment if they are mothers because they fear their children will be taken away from them. And when they do ask for help, there are fewer resources available for them.

One of the themes that we will hear today is the importance of engaging local communities. The structure and connection that can be found in employment, schooling, church, and community groups not only helps with identity and giving life a sense of purpose, but also they can be an essential source of peer support. I am very pleased that with us today is Kennebunk Police Chief Robert McKenzie, and he will talk about his impressive efforts,

including working with Rotary International. Another thing which is near and dear to the Chairman's heart as well as mine is access to health care.

For example, those working in highly physical and dangerous professions, such as the lobster fishing industry, for them the time and travel to take care of anything other than emergency health care needs can deter them from seeking regular care for conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes. Last year, I joined a bipartisan group of senators in introducing legislation to expand telemental health services in rural areas. The *Home-Based Telemental Health Care Act* would establish a grant program for health providers to provide this telemedicine service for those in farming, forestry, and fishing industries.

Another focus of the National Academies of Science report are cardio-metabolic conditions. I will never forget last year, the owner of an ambulance service telling me that his calls were way down. And it was not due to the fact solely that there were fewer automobile accidents as people were not driving. It was that people who were experiencing symptoms of heart attacks were afraid to go to the hospital during COVID. And they should have.

We also saw people putting off treatment and screenings that might have uncovered cancer at an earlier age. Here again, community interventions such as those where people can participate virtually, like diabetes self-management training, can help change the trajectory of life expectancy. As we continue to grapple with the Delta variant and emerge from the pandemic, we should take stock in the areas where we have done well, like telehealth, as well as analyze those areas that have worsened like substance abuse disorders. So this hearing is very well timed, and I look forward to hearing from our panel. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.