

**Governor Janet Mills Remarks as Prepared for Delivery**  
**Press Conference re The Independent Commission to Investigate the**  
**Facts of the Tragedy in Lewiston**  
**Friday, September 6, 2024**

Good afternoon.

Thank you for joining me today. To all members of the media who are present, please ensure that our ASL interpreters are visible in your shots for the full duration of this press conference.

I want to begin my remarks by thanking the members of the Independent Commission for their dedicated, deliberate, thorough, and transparent work over these past many months.

In the aftermath of the horrific attack on our friends, family, and fellow citizens, when darkness descended on our state and the depth of our grief seemed infinite, Attorney General Aaron Frey and I entrusted the members of the Independent Commission with a solemn duty – to put to use their extensive legal, investigative, and mental health experience and expertise, their impartiality and integrity, and their unflagging determination to establish, to the greatest extent possible, the unvarnished facts of what happened on October 25, 2023 and the circumstances that led to and that followed that tragic night.

On behalf of the nearly 1.4 million people of the State of Maine, I thank the seven members of the Independent Commission, as well as its staff, for maintaining the objective pursuit of truth as your guiding star. I also thank you for treating the many people who came before the Commission under difficult circumstances, most notably the family members of the victims of this tragedy, with the compassion and respect they deserved. And I also thank those who spoke before the Commission, especially the survivors and the family members of the victims, who summoned remarkable strength amid unspeakable grief to share crucial information. Thank you.

**The Independent Commission – after spending hundreds of hours of their time, without compensation, to listen to voluntary and compelled testimony, review thousands of documents, and meticulously uncover and assemble the available facts of this tragedy – has fulfilled the duty we entrusted to them.**

**Over these past two weeks, I have closely reviewed the findings of the Independent Commission’s final report, using the days since its release to carefully read, and re-read, the conclusions contained in its 215 pages.**

**In reading the report, I brought to bear my nearly 50 years of experience, including as a private attorney for sixteen years; as a former Assistant Attorney General who prosecuted major crimes; as the District Attorney for Franklin, Oxford, and Androscoggin Counties, which includes the City of Lewiston; as the Attorney General for the State of Maine, and now, as Governor.**

**I stand before you today to say that I have full faith and confidence in the facts as determined by the Commission and I agree with the conclusions that the Commission has reached.**

**This report was frustrating and painful to read.**

**In the months preceding the shooting, the family of the perpetrator repeatedly raised concerns about his declining mental health to multiple authorities.**

**Despite those warnings, these authorities — chiefly the Sagadahoc County Sheriff’s Office and the U.S. Army Reserve — missed multiple opportunities to intervene, to reduce the risk that the perpetrator posed to the people of Maine, and, very possibly, to have changed the course of events.**

**On multiple occasions, the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office and the U.S. Army Reserve disregarded facts, failed to follow established procedures, and demonstrated a callous neglect that contributed to the tragedy of October 25th.**

**I do not say this lightly. Every day, in communities across Maine, dedicated law enforcement officers patrol our roads, safeguard our cities and towns and our natural resources, always ready for that one urgent call to protect the life and security of our citizens and to uphold the law.**

**But in this case, we must acknowledge that the Sagadahoc County Sherriff's Office — Sergeant Skolfield in particular — could have and should have done more. I have read the independent review the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office paid to have done last November. That review concludes that the responding officers followed the law and their training with information available at the time and acted reasonably. In light of the Independent Commission's authoritative report, I do not find that analysis persuasive.**

**As the Independent Commission's report makes clear, the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office was well aware of the declining mental health of the perpetrator and was warned that he could pose a danger to himself or others. The Office could have but did not seek an involuntary commitment order. They could have but did not invoke Maine's Extreme Risk Protection Order law, despite having probable cause that the perpetrator was mentally ill, posed a likelihood of serious harm, and the officer had probable cause to believe that he possessed, controlled or may have acquired a dangerous weapon. They could have but did not consult their own new mental health liaison to help secure the perpetrator's cooperation.**

**Instead, the Office attempted to pass off the responsibility for securing the perpetrator's weapons to his family, they cancelled the File 6 warning about the perpetrator, and they closed the case.**

**We must acknowledge that the U.S. Army Reserve — Captain Reamer in particular — should have but did not follow through on a plan to talk to the perpetrator. The Army Reserve should have but did not return multiple phone calls from the perpetrator’s sister, who was trying to convey her concerns and seek help. They should have but did not follow up on the recommendations of a psychiatric nurse practitioner after the perpetrator’s mental health commitment, despite leading the practitioner to believe they would. They should have but did not share important information about the perpetrator with the Sagadahoc County Sheriff’s Office, which may have better informed the Sheriff’s Office decision-making. They should have but did not take other steps, outlined in Army Reserve procedures, that could have removed the perpetrator’s weapons.**

**Instead, at multiple critical junctures, the U.S. Army Reserve ignored, downplayed, and failed to share information with other law enforcement or to take action that could have changed the course of events.**

**At its core, this tragedy was caused by a colossal failure of human judgment by several people, on several occasions; a profound negligence that – as the Commission rightly stated – was an abdication of responsibility.**

**As I have said in the past, understanding the facts and circumstances of this tragedy is a cornerstone of healing.**

**Another cornerstone is accountability.**

**This fall, the people of Sagadahoc County will have before them an opportunity to judge both Sergeant Skolfield and Sheriff Merry. I urge the people of Sagadahoc County to read this report and to consider it deeply as they decide who should be the next sheriff of**

that department. This report should inform that very important decision.

When it comes to the Army Reserve, in July, they issued a report – along with an independent review of that report – noting their failures and the disciplinary actions they have taken against three individuals in the chain of command who were responsible for those failures. The report also makes recommendations to improve the oversight and care of Army Reserve soldiers in the future.

This morning, I sent a letter to United States Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin asking for an update on the status of those recommendations and urging him to ensure that they are fully implemented in as timely a way as possible.

And today, I am also announcing my support for forthcoming federal legislation being drafted by U.S. Senators Susan Collins and Angus King to direct the military to fully utilize state crisis intervention programs – like Maine’s – to help prevent future tragedies.

At the State level, in the many months since the tragedy, I have sat with myself — and my own conscience — reflecting upon what is right for Maine in the wake of Lewiston and the tragedies of suicide and domestic violence that are all too prevalent in our society. I have tried to take a broad view of violence in Maine, and I asked myself what wise and prudent actions we can take to restore the personal and community sense of safety that was shattered by the tragedy of October 25<sup>th</sup> and to anticipate, and potentially prevent, other acts of violence.

Throughout my time in office, I have tried to bring people together — lawmakers, law enforcement, public health, and others — to achieve enduring reforms that strengthen public safety, that protect our Constitutional rights, and that honor Maine’s longstanding outdoor traditions.

**After the tragedy, I spoke with people and organizations across Maine; I listened to ideas and concerns and tried to develop a balanced approach to this difficult issue. What I heard from people across the state is that they recognize the problem of gun violence. They see it in acts of domestic violence, suicide, and mass shootings nationwide.**

**Each person had ideas about what we could do to address the problem, and each of these ideas was different. But what was not different — what was largely agreed upon — was an overarching belief that violence prevention is important; that we must strengthen our mental health system; and that dangerous people should not have access to firearms.**

**That's why, after the Lewiston tragedy I introduced, and the Legislature approved, measures that enhance public safety and that strengthen Maine's mental health system:**

**We strengthened Maine's Extreme Risk Protection Order Law to clarify that law enforcement can seek a warrant signed by a judge, in unusual circumstances, to take a person into protective custody. This provision in the law has already been put to use. We further strengthened the law to allow for reciprocity for those who are under risk protection orders in other states, providing law enforcement with yet another tool to remove the weapons of someone deemed dangerous.**

**Now, I recognize there are some who argue that the law is cumbersome. For example, some have questioned the necessity of taking an individual into protective custody and of conducting a mental health assessment to determine risk — suggesting that these are unnecessary hurdles that only make the removal of weapons more difficult.**

**But I believe these steps strengthen our law because they protect due process rights, making the law more constitutionally sound and less subject to being struck down if anyone were to challenge it. And these assessments serve as a vehicle to identify behavioral health needs and to refer a person to mental health services.**

**It is clear that, following last year's tragedy, more and more law enforcement officers across the state are taking this law seriously, have taken state-provided training on its use, and are now using it on a daily basis to remove firearms from those who should not have them.**

**There is no better testament to that than the fact it has been used at least 330 times in the past 318 days since October 25<sup>th</sup>.**

**In other words, the law has been used more than once a day since the shooting in Lewiston in courts all over the state – about 15 times more than it had been used in the preceding three years that it had been on the books.**

**Maine's Extreme Risk Protection Order law works.**

**In addition to strengthening the Extreme Risk Protection Order Law, we also have extended the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) to advertised, private sales of firearms, and we have incentivized background checks in situations where people are selling to people they do not know.**

**We are establishing an Office of Violence Prevention at the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention to coordinate and promote efforts to reduce violence.**

**We are creating more crisis receiving centers, including in Lewiston, that build on the success of the one we created in Portland, allowing**

**any person experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis to get immediate, appropriate, and no-cost care.**

**We are strengthening Mobile Crisis Teams that will be dispatched to a person in crisis through 988 -- Maine's 24/7 crisis lifeline.**

**+++**

**I recognize that, on the one hand, these actions are too little to those who believe more is needed, while, on the other hand, they are too much to those who believe the opposite.**

**But violence is not a simple problem, nor is the remedy a single, simple measure. And these actions represent progress. They do not trample on anybody's rights. They are practical, common-sense measures that are not extreme or unusual. They are not a cookie cutter version of another's state's laws; they are Maine-made and true to our culture and our longstanding traditions while meeting today's needs.**

**+++**

**I also want to take a moment to acknowledge all of the first responders and emergency personnel who played a role in responding to the tragedy. Whether you were a dispatcher, police officer, fire or EMS personnel, hospital staff, victims' advocate, ASL interpreter, or other personnel – I am so deeply grateful for your effort.**

**That night, all of you were confronted with an emergency the likes of which you have never faced before, with two active shooting sites and dozens killed and injured, numerous reports of other active shooting sites, and a simultaneous state-wide manhunt following up on thousands of leads and tips.**



**All of you, along with the Maine State Police, met this challenge with courage and compassion, providing emergency medical support to the survivors, gathering and preserving evidence for a possible criminal prosecution, locating the body of the perpetrator, protecting and informing the public; and coordinating hundreds of officers, more than a dozen tactical teams, and several federal agencies at the same time.**

**On behalf of all Maine people, I thank our State Police Officers, especially Commissioner Sauschuck, Colonel Ross, Chief St. Pierre of Lewiston and Chief Ryan McGee of Lisbon – and all first responders who came out that night – for answering the call of duty. While we all wish that the perpetrator had been located sooner, the Commission is right to recognize that the collective work of law enforcement prevented further loss of life, both among police personnel and the people of Maine.**

**In addition to the leadership of the Maine State Police coordinating those officers, I also want to commend the Maine State Police's transparency throughout this Commission's process. They made thousands of pages of documents available to the Commission and to the public, and they fully cooperated with the Commission. And throughout the process, the State Police have been forthright in their acknowledgement that if there are opportunities for improvement, they want to pursue them.**

**To that end, the Commission's report encouraged a full after-action review of the Department of Public Safety's response, with an independent review.**

**This morning, the Department of Public Safety released that after-action report and announced that that report will undergo an independent review by outside experts with law enforcement experience. I applaud this move.**

**The after-action report also outlined a series of primary recommendations to improve communication and coordination during future police responses including:**

- **providing additional training to Maine State Police Officers and personnel on active shooter, crime scene, and Incident Command System protocols. The Incident Command System, used during the Lewiston tragedy and other emergencies, establishes a clear chain of command that should be followed to coordinate the deployment of federal, state, county, and local responders during a crisis and to avoid confusion;**
- **working with Federal partners to develop protocols for handling significant incidents and/or mass casualty incidents and to train local hospitals on following those protocols;**
- **reviewing and updating policies to ensure that any response to events involving the Deaf and hard of hearing community, English as a Second Language speakers, or persons with disabilities in Maine includes accessible information sharing and support;**
- **and training supervisors on providing psychological support to their employees following incidents like these, which can leave so many seen, and unseen, scars.**

**I agree with and support these primary recommendations, and I want to see them implemented.**

**To that end, over the coming months, the Maine State Police will sit down with my budget office to determine what financial resources are necessary to implement these primary recommendations.**

**Following those conversations, I will ask the Legislature, as part of my biennial budget request in January, to approve funding that will**

**allow the Maine State Police to fully implement these recommendations.**

**While we fervently hope that law enforcement officers never again have to answer an urgent call like that of October 25<sup>th</sup>, we want to ensure that if that call comes, they are ready and that they have learned from the challenges they experienced that terrible night so that we may, to the greatest extent possible, avoid them happening again.**

**Lastly, as I have said before, a cornerstone of our ability to heal as a people and as a state is knowing the truth about what happened on October 25<sup>th</sup> and the circumstances that surround that tragic day.**

**The Independent Commission has delivered those facts, and, with this report, we take another step forward on that long road to healing.**

**I think it is important to acknowledge that we are all at different points – different stages – of healing. Some may still feel frustrated and angry. Some may feel scared. Some may feel grief and sadness, or frozen in time, watching the world move on while they are missing the people they love – a feeling that the last year passed in both the blink of an eye and a lifetime.**

**I know, I feel all of these things at times, and I want people to know that these feelings are okay. I have found that the best antidote, if you will, to the anger, grief, and fear is love. It is love, compassion, understanding, and support. The answer is community.**

**We have lost 18 people – family, friends, loved ones. Many more were injured, both physically and emotionally.**

**In a small, close-knit community like Lewiston and in a small, close-knit state like Maine, most everyone knew somebody who was directly impacted by the tragedy.**

**What is special about Maine – what I have always loved about our state – is that, in the darkest of times, in the depths of our most difficult challenges, we are there for one another.**

**Whatever you are feeling, and however long you feel it, know that you are not alone.**

**Let us all do our part to protect each other, to listen when someone asks for help, and to speak up when something doesn't feel right. To offer our grace to those who are still grieving and our love to the people of Lewiston.**

**We will always remember and pay tribute to the victims, the survivors, and their loved ones. And we will always remember how we came together as one people and as one state to support one another.**

**Thank you.**