Testimony by Deborah Ellwood, President & CEO of the Maine Community Foundation to the Maine Legislature's Government Oversight Committee
November 18, 2026

Good morning, Senator Hickman, Representative Mastraccio, and members of the Government Oversight Committee.

My name is Deborah Ellwood, and I serve as President and CEO of the Maine Community Foundation. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and speak about our organization's response to the tragic shootings in Lewiston on October 25, 2023.

I want to begin by sharing a little about our organization and the role we play in Maine. Our mission is simple: to bring people and resources together to build a better Maine.

As the state's largest community foundation and Maine's second largest foundation overall, we work in all 16 counties, partnering with donors, not-for-profits, businesses, and local leaders to improve the lives of Mainers through grants, scholarships, and community partnerships.

We manage 13 competitive grant programs that provide charitable resources all across the state, including grants to Main Street Skowhegan, Turner Public Library, Gardiner Public Library, Project Sparrow in Winthrop, The Rural Community Action Ministry in Leeds, and Caring Unlimited in York County, among others.

In addition to administering grants, we work in collaboration with people and organizations throughout Maine on some of the biggest challenges facing the state.

For example, we are helping to preserve affordable housing by providing financial support to help mobile home residents buy the properties their homes sit on. This summer, we helped 31 families in Jay gain control over the largest item in their budget, power over how they are governed and have a better sense of community with their neighbors.

Maine Community Foundation has spent more than 40 years mobilizing resources to respond to the needs of communities. That brings me to why we are here today.

Before anything else, I want to acknowledge the victims, survivors, and families in Lewiston whose lives were forever changed on October 25, 2023. Eighteen Mainers were killed. Many others were injured, and countless members of the community carry lasting emotional and psychological scars.

Having just passed the third anniversary of the deadliest shooting in Maine's history, we recognize that the grief, pain, and trauma experienced by so many families have not gone away.

In the aftermath of that unimaginable tragedy though, we also witnessed something extraordinary: the compassion and generosity of Mainers.

First responders, medical professionals, faith leaders, community organizations, businesses, and Mainers of all stripes stepped forward to help. Neighbors consoled neighbors. On Lisbon Street, paper hearts appeared on trees with messages reading: "To my city." "To my neighbor." "Lewiston Strong."

Like so many others, the Maine Community Foundation wanted to do whatever we could to help.

It was immediately clear that charitably inclined people from across the world wanted to make financial contributions. We knew we were uniquely positioned to help process these donations. So, guided by a nationally recognized victims' advocate with extensive experience responding to mass-casualty events, we quickly worked to establish a process for collecting and distributing charitable contributions. Based on that guidance, within 36 hours we established two separate funds with distinct purposes for people to give to.

The Victims and Families Fund provided direct financial assistance to victims, survivors, and their families. The second Broad Recovery Efforts and Organizations Fund supported broader recovery efforts led by charitable organizations serving the Lewiston-Auburn community. Both were intended to respond to the devastating and far-reaching consequences of the shootings.

The two funds and their purposes were widely publicized. Within two days of the shootings, Tom Caron — a Lewiston native and television personality for the New England Sports Network — was on the radio encouraging Mainers to donate.

The outpouring of generosity was remarkable, with more than 5,300 donations from people across Maine, throughout the country, and around the world.

Some were extraordinary contributions from Maine businesses like L.L.Bean. Most were smaller gifts of less than $250. We received envelopes containing a few dollars in cash, and a check from parents at a childcare center who had passed the hat because they wanted to do whatever they could to help.

Every contribution represented someone's desire to support a community in need. And we understood our responsibility, and legal obligation, to honor that generosity.

Ultimately, people contributed $6.6 million to these two funds — $4.7 million to the Victims and Families Fund and $1.9 million to the Broad Recovery Efforts and Organizations Fund.

Contributions to the Victims and Families Fund provided direct financial assistance to victims, survivors, and families. In total, 162 recipients received support to help with medical expenses, lost wages, emotional trauma, and other needs.

Contributions to the Broad Recovery Efforts and Organizations Fund supported 29 charitable organizations providing critical services throughout Lewiston-Auburn.

I want to emphasize that these were separate funds. Donors told us which fund they wanted their money to go to, and it was important for us to honor that.

When donors did not specify a preference, our published policy provided for those gifts to be divided equally between the two funds.

Donors received a receipt from MaineCF within days of their donation that expressed appreciation for their support and confirmed to which fund or funds their donation went.

The foundation waived its administrative and processing fees so that 100% of the donated resources could support the recovery. Our role was to serve strictly as a conduit for donations coming in.

I also want to speak directly about the important work of the organizations that received support. In the days and weeks after the shootings, the needs of the Lewiston-Auburn community extended far beyond immediate financial assistance.

An all-volunteer steering committee of business, community, and civic leaders in the Lewiston-Auburn area was formed to provide essential insight and context on the region, and to help craft the overall process and approach for distributing the donations to the Broad Recovery Efforts and Organizations Fund.

Some of the organizations that applied for and received funding included:

- Tri-County Mental Health Services, who provided trauma counseling and support for survivors, first responders, and community members.
- Generational Noor, who expanded mental health resources for young people struggling with grief and trauma.
- Maine MILL, who helped preserve the community's memorials, creating a lasting space for remembrance, reflection, and healing.
- The Maine Resiliency Center, which was established to help people navigate the long road toward recovery and continues that important work today.

These not-for-profits, along with dozens of others, are woven into the fabric of the Lewiston-Auburn community. They are led by our friends and neighbors, and their work matters.

We have publicly documented our process, explained our funding criteria, and provided information about the organizations that received support.

Our two-fund approach is not unique to Lewiston. This same process was used after other mass shootings, including the Walmart shooting in El Paso and the Robb Elementary Shooting in Uvalde. It has been described as a best practice for these kinds of relief efforts.

Our collection and distribution process was thoroughly reviewed by the Maine Attorney General's Office. They identified no legal concerns.

We understand there may be disagreements about how best to support communities in times of tragedy. But make no mistake: We are proud of our work, the integrity of our operations, and the role we played in the aftermath of the Lewiston shootings.

At the same time, we recognize that no financial distribution can ever fully address the profound and lasting consequences of this tragedy. No amount of money can replace a loved one, erase trauma, or restore a family's sense of security.

From the outset, Maine Community Foundation's role was to serve as a vehicle for people wanting to provide financial assistance during a time of extraordinary need. Our goal was to help bridge the gap between the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and the longer-term support provided by government and the healthcare system.

Today, victims, survivors, and families can access the ongoing care and assistance they need through resources like Maine's Victims' Compensation Program, the Mass Violence Care Fund supported by Maine State Senator Peggy Rotundo, and the Maine Resiliency Center supported by U.S. Senator Susan Collins.

While our role was always intended to be temporary, our commitment to the people and communities of Lewiston-Auburn remains steadfast.

That commitment reflects the mission that has guided the Maine Community Foundation for more than four decades. We believe in the generosity of Mainers, the strength of our communities, and the extraordinary things we can accomplish when we come together to help our neighbors.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.

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