



Testimony of Samantha Warren, University of Maine System Director of Government & Community Relations
In Support of LD 295, *An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue To Increase Rural Maine's Access to Broadband Internet Service* and LD 354, *An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue To Encourage the Provision of Reliable High-speed Internet in Rural Underserved Areas of Maine*
February 19, 2019

Senator Breen, Representative Gattine and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. My name is Samantha Warren and I am the University of Maine System's Director of Government and Community Relations. I am here today on behalf of Maine's public universities to speak in strong support of public investment in our state's broadband infrastructure – especially to expand reliable, affordable access in our rural regions as proposed by LDs 295 and 354.

Beyond a necessity for the economic growth of our state and the sustainability of its rural communities, the University of Maine System sees access to broadband as a fundamental issue of equity.

As you are likely aware, to ensure our workforce is productive and competitive, the State has a goal that by 2025, 60 percent of Mainers will hold some postsecondary degree or credential that positions them for success. Meeting this goal requires not just the engagement of traditional students who often study on our campuses where this is adequate connectivity but also of working adults, who often live and work in rural communities where there is not.

A recent national report identifies the four most significant challenges facing adults in their pursuit of higher education. Two of those – the need for adult learners to complete credentials flexibly and more quickly, and the gaps in broadband access especially for rural Americans – reinforce the need to address Maine's current broadband limitations.

Many of the 200,000 or so Mainers who have some college but no door-opening degree or credential are time- and place-bound meaning they cannot easily attend classes at one of our campuses or centers. For these individuals, distance education is often the path to personal prosperity. As the University has worked to expand access to public postsecondary education and the options and opportunities it provides to these Maine adults, we have seen significant increases in our online enrollment, which has grown almost 20 percent over the last five years (up 8.6 percent in just the past year alone). Online courses now account for 18.5 percent of the credit hours delivered by the UMS – nearly 60,000 credit hours last fall.

Our goal is to ensure these students studying online enjoy the same quality of engagement as those physically on our campuses. Doing so is particularly important for nontraditional students who are more at-risk and who may need more support to persist to completion. Reliable, robust connectivity is critical to this yet due to cost or limited rural availability, too many learners do not have access to the broadband or hardware capabilities that allows them to engage fully in these learning modalities. It is not unusual to see students or even community members in University campus or center parking lots after hours accessing our WiFi because their home connection is so slow.

In some respects, technology has evolved to adapt to lower bandwidth environments. For example, our platforms will recognize when a student is connecting with low bandwidth and automatically reduce the resolution of video content to allow it to stream uninterrupted. That said, students with low bandwidth connections are likely to have a frustrating and difficult experience attempting to participate in online group activities or class sessions that use video conferencing to share content and connect students in real time. In fact, even most campus-based courses in the 21st century include virtual components from 24-7 student support services to access digital textbooks and other digital library resources.

The state's current broadband infrastructure limits the University's ability to reach the rural regions of the state where there is the greatest need to close gaps in educational attainment and grow the size and skill of our workforce. Lack of high-speed broadband in their communities challenges too many of our current adult students and creates barriers too big to overcome for many other Mainers who may not even seriously consider college because of connectivity issues. While it is ultimately up to this esteemed Committee and your colleagues to determine the best bill and appropriate amount to advance, the University strongly supports a sizable bond to build rural broadband infrastructure, to be administered by the ConnectME Authority.

I thank Sen. Herbig and Rep. Berry, this Committee and the Mills Administration for your commitment to closing Maine's digital and diploma divides and am happy to answer your questions.