



**LD 295 An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue To Increase Rural Maine's  
Access to Broadband Internet Service**

**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**

**Testimony in Support**

**February 19, 2019**

Senator Breen, Representative Gattine and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, my name is Lisa Harvey-McPherson and I am here today providing testimony on behalf of Northern Light Health and our member organizations to speak in support of both of the rural broadband bond bills before you today. Northern Light Health member organizations include 9 hospitals located in southern, central, eastern and northern Maine, 8 nursing facilities, air and ground ambulance, behavioral health, addiction treatment, pharmacy and a state wide home care and hospice program. Ninety three percent of Maine's population lives in the Northern Light Health service area. Northern Light Health is also proud to be one of Maine's largest employers with over 12,000 employees statewide.

Northern Light Health is a technology leader in Maine providing a variety of telehealth services including cardiology, stroke, psychiatry, trauma, pediatric intensive care and in home telemonitoring services state wide. Over the past few years we have worked closely with the MaineCare program and commercial insurers to align clinical advancement in telehealth technology with payment policies. The MaineCare program now has a specific chapter dedicated to policy and payment for telehealth services and we are proud to have one of the most comprehensive Medicaid telehealth benefits in the country.

Maine is a state with limited resource and advancing technology is the most cost effective opportunity we have to increase access to a variety of health care services for citizens in rural Maine. Realistically, for many rural areas technology is the only viable option to increase access to care provided by Northern Light Health specialists. The bill before you today addresses the primary barrier limiting our ability to fully leverage healthcare telehealth technology statewide, resources needed to improve rural broadband access to the internet. In preparing testimony for today I asked Northern Light Health technology and telehealth leaders for information regarding Maine's broadband challenge. Their comments identified the following:

*Maine is in dire need of proper infrastructure. Basically in any area in Maine not directly in proximity to I-95 will experience either degraded or in many*

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*areas no internet service at all. The farther away from I-95, the worse the experience. Maine is like Alaska in many ways utilizing telehealth to improve access to care, except Alaska is so much further ahead providing internet coverage for all.*

Given inadequate broadband infrastructure the examples of internet challenges limiting access to telehealth care are numerous. Acadia Hospital's Restorative Health program offers outpatient therapy and psychiatric medication management to people in their homes. Technology saves the patient travel time and allows them flexibility to fit treatment around busy schedules. Patients can receive this service on a device of their choice such as a smartphone, tablet or personal computer, but access is also dependent on having adequate broadband to conduct the clinical session. Acadia routinely has a number of people in rural areas not been able to take advantage of this service due to broadband limitations.

The opportunity to expand telehealth into the home expands beyond behavioral health services to include substance use disorder counselling, primary care services, specialty services and home care services including nursing, physical therapy, speech therapy and more. All limited by Maine's inadequate broadband infrastructure that cannot accommodate the internet speed required to consistently support the technology.

The infrastructure required is more than bandwidth speed, it must also include built in redundancies that ensure consistent access to support the provision of health care services. To help you visualize the challenge I have attached to my testimony a map created from the FCC website that visualizes the fading out of fixed broadband deployment for northern and eastern Maine. This is our challenge.

Maine's broadband challenge impacts telehealth at all levels of rural connectivity, specialist to primary care providers in rural clinics, and healthcare clinicians to patients at home. We strongly urge you to support this bill and provide financial resources that address this critical challenge.

Thank you.