



**Testimony of the University of Maine System in Support of
LD 2166, *An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational
Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism
Spectrum Disorder*, Presented by UMS Director of Government Relations Samantha Warren
Jan. 31, 2024**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: My name is Samantha Warren and I am the Director of Government Relations for the University of Maine System (UMS) and a proud alumna of the University of Maine at Farmington and the University of Maine.

I testify today on behalf of UMS in support of LD 2166, *Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Our System recognizes this legislation does direct the activities of a fellow public agency and we are sensitive to the increasing constraints on their capacity. However, our experience and a wide body of evidence affirm that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are not being adequately served by our nation's postsecondary institutions. This is a disservice to those individuals and our communities and economy. We are excited about the potential of LD 2166 to begin to address this inequity and opportunity here in Maine and we applaud Rep. Millett and the co-sponsors of this legislation for recognizing that our public institutions need public resources to meaningfully do so.

As this Committee is aware, in 2022, a task force established by LD 924 studying opportunities to improve services —and as importantly, their coordination — for this diverse population noted the need, "To create a bridge of systemic person-centered integrated approaches to ensure that every individual with disabilities and their families/caregivers experience a smooth transition from school to an engaging and meaningful adult life with the necessary services, education, and employment opportunities to make that a reality." For many young adults, higher education — and especially public higher education — is a critically important part of this transition.

Our public universities recognize this. In 2019 and in partnership with the Maine Department of Labor and the Maine Developmental Disabilities Council, UMaine's Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies (CCIDS) piloted the *Step Up to College* preparatory program for students with autism, an intimate and intentional five-week in-person summer session on the Orono campus for high school juniors and seniors. Step Up continued via Zoom during the height of COVID-19, and returned post-pandemic for students interested in STEM education and careers. This places UMaine and our System among a small but growing number of institutions implementing inclusive postsecondary education opportunities for young adults with IDDs and ASD.

LD 2166 could provide additional resources to expand this living and learning program into the academic year, and to more of Maine's students and public universities. As UMaine Associate Professor of Special Education Sarah Howorth, who supported that program and also co-chaired the 2022 task force notes, "The things that you offer for students with autism on college campuses, like peer mentors, will help all students." This sentiment reflects a fundamental tenet of universal design for learning: by designing accessible, inclusive learning

environments from the outset, we can create opportunities for all Maine students to thrive in their transition to postsecondary education and ultimately the Maine workforce.

However, we are inadequately resourced to support all students, including individuals with IDD and ASD, due to our commitment to student affordability and State appropriation that has failed to keep pace with inflation, let alone the evolving needs of our campus community. In FY90, 9.5% of the General Fund went to UMS but by FY23, that share of State support had declined to 4.8%. For example, staff in the UMaine Office of Student Accessibility Services each have a caseload of more than 250 students. And many of our campus facilities are inaccessible to individuals with disabilities, with ADA improvements among the \$1.6 billion in deferred maintenance and imminent infrastructure needs urgently facing our statewide System.

There is nationally recognized expertise in improving inclusive education and services within UMS, notably at UMaine through CCIDS and the Maine Access to Inclusive Education Resources. Additionally, an Associate Dean in UMaine's College of Education and Human Development served as an evaluator of the State-funded Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative, which can be highly informative to our efforts here in Maine.

To that end, as the Legislature and the Department develop the competitive grant program authorized by LD 2166, we encourage you to utilize that expertise both shaping and evaluating any pilot projects. Additionally, please know that if these competitive grants are made available for planning and/or implementation, our public universities will apply. In fact, we believe State support could make Maine institutions like those within UMS more competitive for federal grant monies through the U.S. Department of Education's Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, for which we plan to apply in 2025.

Studies have consistently shown that programs such as those which could be piloted by the passage of LD 2166 provide valuable career preparation opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, without which they are substantially less likely than peers to be employed. A transition to meaningful employment is a key way that many young people find fulfillment in early adulthood and advances the goal in the State's 10-year economic strategy of increasing labor force participation, including among individuals with disabilities.

I want to leave you with the words of my colleague, Dr. Howorth: "Individuals on the spectrum bring a lot to communities, whether that be university campuses, or high schools or businesses. Oftentimes, we focus on the challenges they face, but I think they have many, many more strengths than challenges."

Maine's public universities welcome targeted resources to support these students and employers and communities to leverage these strengths, for the benefit of all Mainers. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and to your commitment to supporting all Maine students.