



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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January 31, 2023

*Testimony of Representative Morgan Rielly presenting*

## **LD 143, “An Act to Support Rural Service Programming and Promote Volunteerism”**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs*

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs. My name is Morgan Rielly, and I represent House District 127, which includes part of Westbrook. I am here today to present **LD 143, An Act To Support Rural Service Programming and Promote Volunteerism**, which would fully fund the existing Maine Service Fellows (MSF) Program.

### **Background of MSF:**

First, allow me to give a brief history of the development and passage of the program. MSF was born out of a “service think tank” that Volunteer Maine, our state service commission, hosted in the Fall of 2020. The participants represented small municipal offices, nonprofits, school districts, elected officials, and businesses from across the state. All those present recognized that Maine needs to expand service programming in our rural communities to address the negative economic impact rural communities have faced from the COVID-19 pandemic, along with ongoing issues around public health, housing, and environmental concerns. Those in attendance identified a gap in our service infrastructure, with many small rural communities and micro-organizations unable to support traditional service programs like AmeriCorps in their communities due to the high cost and federal red tape. Another key issue members focused on was the need to retain younger Mainers here in the state, particularly in rural communities.

Volunteer Maine, stakeholders, and I then drafted and introduced legislation ([LD 1010](#)) to establish the MSF Program during the first session of the 130th Legislature.

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LD 1010, like LD 143, was a bipartisan piece of legislation. The bill passed in the State and Local Government Committee, which has oversight of Volunteer Maine, with bipartisan support before being enacted in the House and Senate. Governor Janet Mills signed LD 1010 into law in June of 2021. Sadly, Volunteer Maine and I were only able to secure enough funding for one fellow during the second session and the commission has received private funding for only one other fellow. We had aimed to fund the pilot program at \$350,000 a year (for three years). This amount would have supported a small group of initial Fellows.

On the guidance of former Representative Will Tuell, then a member of State and Local, we amended LD 1010 to include an implementation task force to help guide the program in its early stages along with defining “rural communities.” Volunteer Maine adopted USDA’s RUCA codes to determine where Maine Service Fellows will operate. For those who don’t know, RUCA stands for rural-urban commuting area codes. These codes are used to classify U.S. Census tracts using measures of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting.

Currently, the communities that are eligible for the Maine Service Fellows program are in the following counties: Aroostook, Franklin, Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, Waldo, and Washington. There are also some towns in Penobscot County that qualify as long as they have populations under 5,000. Eligible sponsors for MSF are public or private non-profits, state/county/local government, education institutions, faith-based organizations, federally recognized tribes, and regional organizations that are based within the communities previously mentioned. Volunteer Maine, in their testimony, can go into further detail about sponsor qualifications and sponsor obligations. They can also discuss the commission’s obligations and the application process for both Fellows and host communities and organizations. I do want to clarify that organizations that currently host AmeriCorps, VISTAs, or other service-related members are not eligible to sponsor a Service Fellow.

The task force determined six key areas that Maine Service Fellows will focus on that include the following: COVID-19 recovery, housing (including eviction prevention), workforce development, substance use prevention and recovery, public health (including mental health), and climate action areas. Service Fellows devote full-time work, around 1,800 hours over 12

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months, in their respective communities. They commit to two-years of service, are paid a living wage, and upon completion of service receive an educational loan payment that is roughly \$5,700 or 2% of the living allowance.

### **MSF v. other existing service programs:**

During the 130th Legislature there was confusion about the Maine Service Fellows, existing AmeriCorps programs, and the Maine Climate Corps. I want to again assure the Legislature that MSF is designed to complement, not compete, with the existing Maine AmeriCorps program and Maine's Climate Corps. MSF is specifically designed for our small communities and micro-organizations in defined rural areas, allowing for a quicker implementation of the program on the ground and, therefore, a quicker return on investment. Communities can access Fellows' help more rapidly because the application process and accountability requirements are streamlined. As a state-based service program, a broader set of community needs can be addressed, as opposed to federally-prescribed funding priorities. Our small towns know what they need, and the MSF Program will give them the support to take on these issues and build sustainable infrastructure that will continue to operate after Fellows have left these communities.

### **Goals of LD 143:**

Currently, 79 communities qualify for Fellows with 20 communities having already requested one. Milinocket has requested a Fellow to provide assistance with community decisions and plans related to economic development. Pleasant Point (Sipayik) has requested a Fellow for coordinating a community home weatherizing project. These Fellows will be starting their service this spring. And, a coalition of 10 Washington County ambulance associations requested a Fellow to help lead a revitalization of EMS volunteers. Only 2 of the 10 ambulance associations can respond on a 24/7 basis.

Volunteer Maine cannot operate an effective program with only two Service Fellows and there is a strong demand and need among our rural communities for a Fellow. Volunteer Maine,



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communities and organizations in these rural parts of the state, and myself would like to see a fully funded program, which LD 143 would accomplish.

Service programs in Maine, as seen with Maine's Conservation Corps, typically generate \$3 in return investments for every \$1 that is spent, which stays in the communities service members operate in. AmeriCorps programing has [generated roughly \\$34](#) in return investment for every federal dollar spent. Volunteer Maine has said they would plan to see a return on investment for the Maine Service Fellows Program with the money staying within these communities, building up local infrastructure that will make them and partner organizations self-sustaining after Fellows have left.

This is a fiscally smart investment that will leverage state and private monies in order to make the strongest possible impact in aiding rural communities that don't have the capacity for traditional AmeriCorps programming, while promoting civic engagement and volunteerism. And, it will help with workforce development while retaining younger Mainers in state and in our rural communities.

With a fully-funded Maine Service Fellows program of 15 Fellows, Volunteer Maine and I hope that we will be able to use the work of these Fellows over the next couple of years to promote future private-public partnerships that will provide additional private funds and offset future costs of the program.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions or to provide you with any information for your upcoming work session.