

Testimony neither for nor against LD 258, “An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025.”

February 22, 2023

James Myall, Economic Policy Analyst

Good afternoon, Senators Rotundo and Baldacci, Representatives Sachs and Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and on Health and Human Services. My name is James Myall. I’m an Economic Policy Analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy. I’m here to offer testimony neither for nor against the Health and Human Services provisions of the Governor’s biennial budget proposal (LD 258).

Last session, the bipartisan budget included a provision to allow children and pregnant women from low income families to access the MaineCare program regardless of their income level. This year MECEP asks you to extend that provision to all adult Mainers. We believe that immigration status should not preclude those in need from receiving health care, and that coverage through the MaineCare program should be available to all vulnerable people in Maine.

We’ve all learned a few things over the past couple of years. The pandemic has shown us the importance of access to timely and affordable health care. Due to actions by the federal and state governments, Mainers have been able to get COVID-19 tests and vaccinations without worrying about the cost. This has been a literal lifesaver for many. But outside of COVID-19 testing and treatment, far too many Mainers still struggle to afford health care. In 2021, one in ten non-elderly adults in Maine skipped or delayed medical care because they couldn’t afford it, and this was even more common for low-income Mainers. For those whose incomes were below \$15,000 a year, the share was as high as one in four.¹ Even delaying simple things like an annual checkup can have profound consequences - like catching a disease when it’s much more serious and harder to treat.

The other lesson we drew from the pandemic is the way in which our wellbeing as a society is interconnected. Ensuring that everyone has access to affordable health care is a benefit to our whole society. We know that COVID-19 spread particularly quickly among low-income Americans, often people of color, because they were more likely to work in close-contact service jobs, and because they often had underlying health conditions that were untreated.² And especially in the first year of the pandemic, Black, Latino, and Indigenous people had some of the highest mortality rates from the virus, for similar reasons.³ Ensuring that every vulnerable person has equal access to our health care safety net will keep them healthy and by extension keep us all healthier.

Finally, I want to emphasize that this relatively small outlay for the State of Maine will have greater economic benefits in the future. By ensuring that these adults have access to care, we will be relieving a strain on the hospital system which has an obligation to provide emergency care for free – often for those same expensive predicaments that went untreated because patients didn’t have access to

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preventative care or medicines earlier. We've seen this with Medicaid expansion for the wider population, which has brought down hospital costs significantly in Maine.⁴

We'll also be supporting these Mainers in for the future – allowing them to fulfill their maximum potential in the workforce, eventually paying taxes back to the state. New Mainers are particularly likely to work in grocery stores and care homes, restaurant kitchens and hotels – many of the industries which are currently struggling to find workers. At the same time, health concerns are the leading reason many Mainers either aren't working at all, or not working as many hours as they might like. Ensuring that new arrivals have access to healthcare makes it more likely that they will be able to contribute fully to our economy in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I urge you to make MaineCare coverage available to everyone regardless of immigration status as part of the biennial budget.

I'll be happy to take any questions and can be reached at jmyall@mecep.org

Notes

¹ US Centers for Disease Control, Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance Survey, 2021

² US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, "The Impact of the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Recession on Families With Low Incomes," Sep 20, 2021. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2021-09/low-income-covid-19-impacts.pdf>

³ Latoya Hill and Samantha Artiga, "COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by Race/Ethnicity: Current Data and Changes Over Time," *Kaiser Family Foundation*, Aug 22, 2022. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/covid-19-cases-and-deaths-by-race-ethnicity-current-data-and-changes-over-time/>

⁴ James Myall, "MaineCare Expansion at 4: Greater Care, Healthier Hospitals, Stronger Economy," *Maine Center for Economic Policy*, Jan 3, 2023. <https://www.mecep.org/blog/mainecare-expansion-at-4-greater-care-healthier-hospitals-stronger-economy/>

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