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**MEJ Testimony *in Support of* LD 1026, Resolve, To Direct the University of Maine System to Establish a Dental Therapy Degree Program**

March 22, 2023

Good morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Advocacy and Programs Director for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. I am speaking today in support of LD 1026.

I have the honor of serving as chair of the MaineCare Advisory Committee (MAC) and also its Dental Subcommittee. The subcommittee formed in 2021 due to many oral health needs being experienced by MaineCare members – both children and adults. That same year, the legislature passed with strong bipartisan support a comprehensive dental benefit for adults with MaineCare coverage. Children with MaineCare already had a dental benefit. Throughout the effort to pass that legislation, we heard from many low-income people about the importance of dental care for their overall health and wellbeing as well as for social interactions and employment. Dental care is indeed health care and is vital for us all. Beginning in August 2021, the MAC Dental Subcommittee worked closely with the Office of MaineCare Services (OMS) to ensure we created a strong dental benefit for adults, made positive improvements to the benefit for children, and supported OMS in crafting new rates for dental care.

I share this background because in the past few years I have unexpectedly become well versed in the opportunities and challenges our oral health system faces in Maine. The overwhelming issue we hear both at Maine Equal Justice and at the MAC Dental Subcommittee is that we need to grow our oral healthcare workforce at every level to meet the needs of all Mainers. Dental therapists can play a key role in meeting these needs. Unfortunately, due to the lack of degree programs in Maine, we have very few dental therapists working in our state. Creating a degree program at the University of Maine at Augusta would grow the number of professionals who can provide dental care and also create another career option in the oral health workforce. It's a win for individuals seeking a strong career opportunity and a win for Mainers who too often struggle to find oral health providers.

For all these reasons, Maine Equal Justice support LD 1026 and urge you to vote Ought to Pass. Thank you for your attention on this issue.