



Maine Chapter

Testimony in support of LD 199: **An Act to Improve the Health of Maine Residents by Removing Exclusions to the MaineCare Program**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Dr. Julia Oppenheimer and I live in Portland, Maine. I am a resident physician training in pediatrics. I represent the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and thus, represent a large network of pediatricians across the state of Maine. We stand in support of LD 199, because we feel passionately that all Mainers, regardless of age, income, or immigration status, deserve equitable access to healthcare.

I feel proud and privileged to care for a population of primarily New Mainer families. These families arrive in Maine, often following arduous and dangerous journeys, hoping for a better life for themselves and their children. They have had to make the incredibly difficult decision to leave most of their possessions, their livelihoods, their culture and traditions, their extended families – and sometimes, their eldest children – behind, all to escape political corruption and unrest and seek safety in the U.S. I met one family during their toddler's initial intake appointment, who told me that they knew they had to leave their home country when they woke up one night to bandits holding them at gunpoint. They fled that evening and made much of the journey through Central America on foot. They had additional encounters with bandits who took their remaining possessions along the way. Their child developed asthma during this journey and was briefly hospitalized in Mexico. They spent a few days in a detention center in Texas, and upon release someone bought them tickets to travel to Maine.

They arrived with no means. Despite finding shelter at a local hotel and establishing with basic community services, they still had to ration food. They had no transportation and had to walk several miles in freezing temperatures to the grocery store. Their child was hospitalized again for asthma and was started on a daily inhaler. She needed to see a pulmonologist and establish care within our clinic. The family had no health insurance at this time. We spent a majority of the visit focused on how to pay for healthcare costs and other basic needs, which meant less time to talk about her asthma and preventative healthcare. Fortunately, my patient was ultimately able to qualify for health insurance through MaineCare. But many low-income adults have been excluded from recent expansions to MaineCare, solely because of their immigration status. Even with free care programs offered through hospital systems, patients who do not qualify for MaineCare are often unable to afford prescription drugs¹. I worry that some families may not seek care due to the prohibitive cost and lack of access to affordable insurance.

¹ Snider, Ari. "State lawmakers consider removing immigration status as a barrier to MaineCare." Maine Public. 2023, March 15. www.mainepublic.org

Immigrant families are crucially important to our industry and culture here in Maine. According to the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition, immigrants make up about 3% of Maine's total population, and ~4% of workers in Maine's labor force². Although Portland and Cumberland County have the largest population of immigrants, Androscoggin, Aroostook, Kennebec, Penobscot, and York Counties also have significant populations³. 41% of immigrants in Maine have a bachelor's degree or higher³. They provide essential labor in some of Maine's most important industries, including seafood, agriculture, hospitality, and healthcare. They make up more than 2% of self-employed business owners in Maine and make ~\$48 million in annual revenue². According to Maine Equal Justice, immigrants pay at least \$193.9 million in Maine state and local taxes each year⁴. They have overcome remarkable adversity and deserve equitable access to healthcare. They deserve the comfort of knowing that if they get sick, they will not have to choose between their basic needs and their medications or hospital bills¹.

Maine immigrants also deserve equitable access to preventative health care and mental health care to build healthy lifestyles and reduce illness. As physicians, we know that health prevention leads to better health outcomes for individual patients as well as healthier communities. We also recognize that preventative healthcare reduces emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and exorbitant healthcare costs down the road. We can do better for our patients. One individual who immigrated to Maine said of healthcare access in the 2022 State of Maine Community Health Needs Assessment report, "[We need] access to proper health care and it should be affordable. It makes them feel like you won't survive in America if you don't have money to pay for healthcare"³.

We urge you to stand with us to ensure that all Mainers, regardless of age, income, or immigration status, receive equitable healthcare coverage. A vote for LD 199 is a vote to improve the health of our communities and workforce.

Thank you.

² Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition, www.maineimmigrantrights.org

³ State of Maine Community Health Needs Assessment Report, 2022. www.maine.gov

⁴ Maine Equal Justice, www.maineequaljustice.org