

Testimony in Support of LD 794

An Act to Expand the Membership of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women

State and Local Committee

PH: Friday, March 31st 9am

Dear Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and Distinguished members of the State and Local Government Committee.

My name is Meredith Strang Burgess and I represented the towns of Cumberland, part of North Yarmouth and the islands of Chebeague and Long in the Maine House of Representatives from 2006 to 2012 (123rd, 124th and 125th).

In 2009, LD 236 was unanimously passed to create Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. I was proud to be a bill sponsor, alongside all the women of the House and Senate.

The Commission was created with the leadership of Governor John Baldacci to be a nonpartisan advisory board that helped to support policy makers by sharing information on the status of Maine's women and girls. I remember, as a legislator, how much information you are bombarded with in your efforts to make the best decisions possible on behalf of your constituents and Mainers across the state. The Women's Commission was designed to support you by providing critical data on the status of women and girls in the state of Maine so you can make informed decisions.

It is interesting to note that the original bill, LD 236, introduced during the Second Session of the 124th Legislature in early 2009, (https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/bills_124th/billpdfs/HP019001.pdf) was written to have some level of administrative support to gather and direct the type of data it was designed to develop and bring forward to the Legislature. However, it was amended to reduce the number of members and eliminate any support. The fiscal note, was stripped and bill voted out of Committee as Emergency Legislation late in the session. (https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/bills_124th/billpdfs/HP019002.pdf). It passed under the hammer and was signed into law on May 22, 2009.

Over the past 14 years, The Commission has worked hard to deliver on its duty to provide some level of reporting to the Legislature on the Status of Women and Girls in Maine. However, this has been done as a volunteer effort with some much appreciated support provided by the Secretary of State's office. Our reporting could be so much more robust with more consistent support.

Over my eight year tenure on the Commission, I've seen firsthand how challenging it is for a group of devoted, but also extremely busy, volunteer Commissioners to execute

the necessary data collection to compile our biannual reports. This is why I'm writing today *in support of* **LD 794, an Act to Expand the Membership of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women**. This bill will restore the Executive Director position within the Secretary of State's office and thus provide the Commission with the necessary capacity to collect data on the status of Maine women and girls from across state agencies. Following the leadership of other states with functioning Commissions, this position will provide much needed leadership and administrative support.

In addition to the funding critical to support the ongoing work of the Commission, this bill also restores the two additional Governor-appointed seats, representing LGBTQIA+ Mainers and young (under the age of 25) Mainers. After reviewing the current Statute, we felt like these two perspectives are fundamental to ensuring the representation on the Commission of lived experiences of Maine women and girls.

I remember from my time in the State House how satisfying it was when my colleagues - Republicans, Democrats, and Independents – could come together to support legislation that would benefit Maine people. Today, you have the opportunity to strengthen the tools available to make decisions that benefit Maine women and girls **right now** and into the future. I urge you to please support LD 794, to finally allow this important Commission to do the work it was intended to do when it was first introduced back in 2009.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Hon. Meredith Strang Burgess
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