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Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Kathleen Hale and I'm the Human Resources Officer at Home, Hope and Healing, a home healthcare agency serving medically fragile children and adults in their homes, throughout Maine. We employ professional nursing staff and paraprofessional caregivers. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the bill LD 51 – An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements. On behalf of my company, I urge you to vote **Ought to Pass** and support LD 51.

Reinstating these exemptions means that we could provide more homes with vital services. Nurses and caregivers could return to work, and caregivers who submit an employment application could work again in their chosen field. Being a small healthcare entity in Maine, the impact of the removal of even a few employees and the inability to hire others has placed additional burdens when we're already struggling to find healthcare workers, especially to support Maine's aging population.

The removal of these exemptions has resulted in stricter state governmental rules and the impact has been that there are less Mainers that can work in healthcare. We don't believe that was the intention of Maine voters. LD 798 was purported to be about protecting Maine children and students from childhood diseases. But this bill didn't just direct the Dept. of Education, it also added an inconspicuous statement in the summary directing DHHS to also remove exemptions as well. Had it been clear at that time that this wasn't only about children and students but also about healthcare, we would have been involved in the legislative process in 2019. At that time, we were focused on providing healthcare services in Maine to which there was and continues to be a staffing shortage.

After this bill became law, the pandemic hit. Religious and philosophical exemptions in place for decades that accommodated and protected staff rights were removed (for the vaccinations from childhood diseases). Our healthcare professionals worked during this incredibly challenging time, even putting client care before themselves and their own families to get us through it. While nonessential workers stayed home, our nurses showed their selflessness by continuing to provide care to vulnerable populations in their homes when not much was known about the pandemic. DHHS then added seasonal flu and COVID-19 to its vaccination requirements. Families did not want to lose their nurses, but they did. Nurses who wanted to work for more years retired early rather than compromise their religious or philosophical beliefs. And office staff that have no client interaction were told that they could no longer work at the office.

People were led to believe that there would at least be medical exemptions if needed since the law stated that one could be issued when, "in a licensed professional's judgement, immunization against one or more diseases was medically inadvisable." Little did we know that there would be more stringency to obtain them such as needing to have a history of anaphylactic reaction to 2 vaccine components (and yet we could not obtain a list of all the vaccine components). Very few people with medical conditions would now qualify for a medical exemption in Maine. Some staff with significant health issues shared with me how they tried to obtain a medical exemption to stay working but were denied. Providers told them they feared losing their professional license and livelihood. Staff relayed that in the past they were able to have shared decision-making conversations with their providers, but now they felt conversations were awkward and that decisions were being made for them.

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The removal of these exemptions has put Maine healthcare entities like ours in a precarious position. We are obligated to follow federal law prohibiting discrimination based on religion, and to reasonably accommodate the religious beliefs of employees. Citizens also have constitutional rights against vaccinations, so philosophical reasons for not wanting to get vaccinated should be honored. Let me be clear, we are not opposed to vaccinations, and we follow the CDC rules. But please understand that our company is being forced to either violate employees' constitutional or religious rights, or risk violating state law and compromising our ability to provide healthcare services in the state of Maine, affecting even more clients and employees. This is a no-win situation for Maine healthcare companies who want to do the right thing by following all laws.

We have a nursing and caregiver shortage in Maine. Passing LD 51 can provide needed relief from this shortage and put Mainers back to work caring for families in their homes. These families miss and need them desperately. We've had qualified nursing and caregiver staff apply for jobs for open positions, who we are unable to hire but are ready and willing to if these exemptions get re-instated. You have the power to help reinstate philosophical and religious exemptions to vaccinations for healthcare workers to serve vulnerable populations in need and put professionals, our healthcare heroes, back to work in Maine. Please vote **ought to pass on LD 51**.

Respectfully submitted,

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