

## Testimony in Support of

### **LD 1304: Resolve to Establish the Task Force to Study Barriers to Achieving Behavioral Health Integration and Parity**

Sandra Butler, PhD and Jeff Hecker, PhD  
April 11, 2024

Dear Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services,

We are Jeff Hecker, Professor of Psychology and Sandy Butler, Professor of Social Work, Co-Directors of the Rural Integrated Behavioral Health in Primary Care (RIBHPC) program at the University of Maine. We both live in Orono. We provide this testimony in support of LD 1304, which we believe is an important step towards addressing the crisis in behavioral health care facing our State.

We received funding for the RIBHPC from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the US Department of Health and Human Services nearly two years ago. The purpose of the project is to train clinical psychology doctoral students and master's level social work students to function effectively in integrated health teams in the rural regions of our State. This is a four-year project, and we expect to graduate 87 students, over that time, who will be well prepared to meet the mental health needs of our communities.

It is no secret that Maine is very challenged by the dearth of mental health clinicians; this is particularly true in rural areas where individuals face long wait times for services due to the shortage of workers. The lack of treatment can have devastating consequences for individuals, their families, and the communities where they live. Our students graduate well prepared to work with other health professionals to holistically provide behavioral health care to some of the Maine's most vulnerable populations. We should work to eliminate any obstacles that exist preventing those services from being provided. The Task Force developed through LD 1304 will gather critical information regarding barriers related to insurance policies and provide recommendations on how to remove those barriers for individuals seeking behavioral health care.

Most of our students are committed to staying in Maine and working in their rural communities. We should make it as easy as possible for them to be able to help Mainers experiencing emotional and mental distress.

We hope you will support LD 1304 so crucial data on barriers can be gathered and analyzed and a path forward determined. The findings of this task force and the actions taken on their recommendations have the potential to ameliorate the health and wellbeing of the many individuals struggling to get the mental health services they need.