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To: Senator Chip Curry
Representative Tiffany Roberts
Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement
and Business

From: Becky Smith, Director of Government and Community Relations

Re: Statement in support of LD 1718 *An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education*

Date: May 2, 2023

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business, please accept this testimony in support of the concept behind LD 1718 *An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education* on behalf of the Maine Community College System. As you have heard in testimony today, the essential support workforce is critical to the health and safety of our most vulnerable residents. They are also undervalued by many in society—that is until someone finds themselves in the position to need support to care for a family member. At that time, they are often surprised by waiting lists and lack of available help.

I have been in that position on and off for the better part of five years with aging family members. I have watched, assisted, and learned from each of the people who have taken care of my family. Often, they are balancing their own family commitments, low pay, and long commutes with the physically and emotionally demanding work of providing care. As I got to know them, they often expressed their interest in continuing their education or their concerns that they could not afford the education their spouse or children needed to fulfill their dreams. Many were working two or more jobs just to make ends meet and perhaps save a small amount of money for education. However, one medical bill, a bout with COVID, or a car repair sets them back to zero.

The voucher program envisioned by LD 1718 would take some of the burden from those who have dedicated their career to be an essential support worker (ESW). Our understanding of the bill is that each year a person is employed by an agency as an ESW and works 30 hours, they earn a voucher. They can earn up to four vouchers and save them for five years. Each voucher has a value of \$4,000. The student must fill out a FAFSA.

As you well know, Maine has committed to providing free community college for those who receive a high school diploma or equivalent in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. The Governor has proposed continuing this program for the years of 2024 and 2025 in her proposed budget (this is not yet approved). MCCS also has several short-term workforce training programs that are free to participants regardless of when they received their diploma. These programs are funded through the State's Maine Quality Center funding, private foundation support and the Maine Jobs and Recovery Funds. MCCS also has the lowest community college tuition in New England. We are the most affordable option to earn a certificate or an associate degree.

However, both the University of Maine System and Maine Maritime, due to the nature of their programs and degrees granted, have higher student costs. Both strive, within their existing budgets, to provide financial aid to students with need. We see the benefit of this program to be primarily for students hoping to attend one of Maine's great four-year public colleges. However, Free College is not guaranteed to be continued and has been funded with one-time money, so this program, if continued, would definitely benefit our students as well. It would also benefit students who are not recently out of high school and do not qualify for Free College.

We would like to caution the committee that some of the language in the bill could be made a bit more clear in order for the program to be designed as the sponsor and advocates intended. I believe that FAME has the expertise on structuring and managing a program such as this, but we are more than willing to work with the committee if you choose to move forward.

Thank you.