

Testimony in Support of LD 1837, An Act to Improve Oral Health & Access to Dental Care among
Maine Children

To the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Friday, May 12, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments in support of LD 1837.

My name is Carolyn Wollen and I am a resident of Brunswick, Maine. My support for this bill comes from my experience in Maine's philanthropic community. I am a trustee of the Betterment Fund, a private foundation devoted to the people of the State of Maine. We have been a member of the Maine Oral Health Funders Group since its founding over almost 20 years ago and I have also been a Council member of the Children's Oral Health Network.

Philanthropy has in some ways a responsibility and an opportunity akin to the one facing Maine's legislature. We collectively have funds that are dedicated to a wide swath of Maine issues but our resources are extremely smaller than the legislature's and also insufficient for the totality of the needs. In many cases we are restricted by the expressed intent of our particular donors. This means we have to make hard decisions in choosing how to spend our grant funds.

So why have a number of Maine foundations chosen to support oral health projects for 20 years? Because we feel that it is one health area in which a relatively smaller investment will pay large dividends in the long run. It is possible to have good oral health for all Maine residents and if we start with our children, it is a relatively inexpensive and painless achievable goal. But our children need access to preventative treatments, attention by dental professionals and education on the importance of good oral health. If we can help them to access these basic services, they can avoid years of pain and expensive restorations. And from the State's point of view, we get children more ready to learn in the classroom, a decrease in expensive and futile emergency room visits from children and adults, less expensive services needed for adults and more workers able to obtain good jobs without the sometimes disqualifying factor of bad teeth. Finally, we are now learning the medical connections between bad oral health and life threatening diseases such as heart disease. Oral health is far more than a pretty smile.

Maine's philanthropic organizations cannot do more than fund a relatively few scattered school programs for Maine's children and we have been doing so over many years. In the funded programs we see significant reduction in children's cavities, so we know that it works to make the investment. New treatment modalities are increasing prevention opportunities. We need the leadership of the State to bring these opportunities for prevention and improved oral health care to children and adults statewide. The hit and miss of philanthropy funding is simply not acceptable.

Our children need your help to achieve good oral health and all the educational, financial and personal benefits that flow from having a healthy mouth.

Thank you.