



**Testimony of Jena Jones on Behalf of
the Maine Council on Aging to the Committee on
Health and Human Services**

**In Favor of LD 915 – Resolve, to Establish the Blue
Ribbon Commission to Study the Organization of
and Service Delivery by the Department of Health
and Human Services**

Provided on May 12, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and the members of the Health and Human Services Committee.

My name is Jena Jones, and I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA). The MCOA is a broad, multidisciplinary network of over 135 organizations, businesses, municipalities, and older community members working to ensure we can all live healthy, engaged, and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age at home and in community settings. I am testifying in favor of LD 915.

On any given day in our state there are tens of thousands of older Mainers who need supports and services, the kinds managed by the Department of Health and Human Services and funded through MaineCare. Thousands of older people who are eligible to receive certain services like home care or homemaker services are going without because of the workforce shortage, yet no other measures are being taken to provide these people a safety net. Others are not able to find residential care because of the number of beds in facilities that are off-line due of staffing shortages.

It has become apparent that Maine's formal care infrastructure for older people is not built to withstand current demand, and that unless the Department shifts its focus and begins active problem solving things will grow exponentially worse. Ultimately, across the continuum of care, challenges abound for multiple reasons, and it is Mainers who are paying the price.

Both Federal and State-funded programs providing supports to older adults, those with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and those with behavioral health challenges are experiencing service delivery challenges, largely due to staffing shortages and inflation. The most recent report released by the Department of Health & Human Services this year highlights these challenges.¹ The report shows that 772 older people (33%) who are entitled Section 19 waiver home care services and 407 older people (53%) entitled under Section 63 aren't getting some or all of the home care they need because of staffing shortages. 20% of people who are supposed to receive Homemaker Services are not being staffed and 1200 are waiting for the program. Nursing homes are at 79% occupancy because of staffing shortages, and they continue

¹ <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/AAAA-Annual-Report-February-2023.pdf>

to be forced into closure with another facility in Belfast announcing it would close within the last few weeks.

These figures represent a mere snippet of our current realities and do not come close to accounting for all of the programs within the Department. Maine's workforce challenges are largely to blame for these service gaps, but they are not the only culprit. Many older people have experienced intentional economic disadvantages over a lifetime and do not have funds to pay out of pocket for home care or nursing home care. These people need affordable housing, case management and care navigation. Yet, the Department remains focused on the lowest of the low income, leaving those with just enough income to barely get by with little or no help.

We must broaden our view – embrace the idea of creating equitable systems and solutions that lift people up, not keep people down. It's time to take a fresh look at the organizational structure and service priorities of the Department to see if the current structure is the right one to meet the challenges and needs of today's Maine citizens. Other states have actively pursued new solutions and tiered service systems, increased eligibility, implemented managed care. We should actively learn what's possible and explore how to integrate those opportunities into our existing structure or a modified one.

We support any and all efforts that aim to comprehensively improve and/or reform the system to ensure that all Mainers who need assistance receive it, and LD 915 represents one of those efforts. The MCOA would also like to suggest that a friendly amendment be made to include on the Commission one member appointed by the President of the Senate who represents an organizations that advocates for older adults. With this amendment, we urge the Committee to support LD 195.

Thank you, I am happy to answer any questions.

Jena Jones