



February 20, 2024

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Alliance for Addiction
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Maine Association for
Community Service
Providers

Maine Association of
Nonprofits

Maine Coalition of
Sexual Assault Services

Mental Health
Corporation of America

National Council for
Mental Wellbeing

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Ellen Bemis and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Aroostook Mental Health Center or AMHC.

On behalf of AMHC, I am here today to express strong support for Legislative Document No. 2200, *"A Resolve to Attract and Retain Behavioral Health Clinicians"*.

As a community mental health center serving Aroostook, Washington, and Hancock counties, AMHC is deeply invested in the well-being of our community. Addressing the shortage of behavioral health clinicians is of utmost importance.

Currently, AMHC is facing a critical shortage of clinicians, with a 30% vacancy rate. This creates significant challenges for individuals seeking mental health therapy. With a waitlist exceeding 2,000 clients and a wait time ranging between 18 and 24 months, it is clear that the demand for mental health services far exceeds the available resources. This prolonged wait time exacerbates the suffering of individuals in need and contributes to the further decline of their mental health leading to higher utilization of emergency departments and crisis services.

Each day we hear about the mental health crisis in our State; our rates of suicide are higher, domestic violence and other violent crimes are on the rise. When individuals do not receive the behavioral health care they need, their symptoms can escalate to levels that can have a detrimental impact on that person, their families, and their communities. I appreciate that the Governor is focused on the need for more access to behavioral health services, which is already limited in the rural counties of Maine. By passing this bill, you will improve access to the services desperately needed by your constituents.

By investing in the recruitment and retention of behavioral health clinicians, we help ensure that individuals in our community receive the timely and high-quality mental health care they deserve. Not only will this improve the lives of those directly impacted by mental illness, but it will also contribute to the overall health and vitality of our community.

As the largest community mental health center in Aroostook County, I know how difficult it is to recruit and retain providers. AMHC believes and invests in the training of new clinicians. Each year we support 14 interns who work with our clinicians. We have been awarded a federal grant that allows us to pay stipends to BSW and MSW candidates while in their internship, so they can be paid while they are gaining experience. This effort helps us in our recruitment of clinicians. Once they become conditionally licensed, AMHC's independently licensed clinicians provides the required clinical consultation they require for a total of 96 hours per year for two years. When clinical consultation is provided to interns, our clinicians are unable to see clients. This model poses two

Programs like the National Health Services Corp. (NHSC) are intended to help alleviate the debt incurred by individuals in the behavioral health field and as a licensed provider AMHC is pleased to participate in this program. Although it offers some advantages as a recruitment technique, conditionally licensed staff do not qualify for loan forgiveness programs through the NHSC. This is an unfortunate gap for new graduates with significant student loans who must wait for two years after receiving their conditional license before becoming eligible for NHSC loan forgiveness.

My hope is that today my colleagues and I make the case that funding for recruitment and retention of behavioral health clinicians is urgent. AMHC believes this piece of legislation will play a vital role in continuing critical access to behavioral health clinicians and mental health services to the more than 5,000 clients we serve. I urge you to support this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ellen Bemis", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ellen J. Bemis, CPA
Chief Executive Officer