

Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee
State House Room 228
Augusta, Maine

Health and Human Services Committee
State House Room 209
Augusta, Maine

Re: LD 2214: An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024, and June 30, 2025

Dear Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Health and Human Services Committee,

I am testifying today on the Governor's Supplemental Budget proposal as a resident of Falmouth and President of the National Association of Social Workers Maine Chapter (NASW Maine). We applaud the Governor's focus on increasing funds for mental health, community policing, and gun safety programs. Yet, this is not enough. Maine's behavioral health workforce is in crisis and needs support NOW to weather current and future storms.

We ask that you **ensure that the Social Work Loan Repayment (LD 632) is fully funded in the Supplemental Budget** (\$500K per year) to impact our behavioral health workforce immediately. In a 2022 survey, 470 Maine social workers reported an average debt load for master's level clinicians of \$74,557. 40% reported deep concerns about paying their loans off in their lifetime, let alone having the funds to buy a home or new car. We won't be able to meet the behavioral health needs in our state if we don't have qualified behavioral health professionals or attract new behavioral health providers to the staff programs.

It's not only the Lewiston shootings that have magnified the implications and urgency of the gaps in our mental health system. Thanks to funding from the Maine Health Access Foundation and Behavioral Health Foundation, preliminary findings provide evidence that Maine's behavioral health system is under siege. From mid-January to mid-February of 2024, 47 behavioral health agencies and 281 individual providers in Maine provided access and workforce data in a **Behavioral Health Point-in-Time survey**. Although the results are preliminary until complete analyses are finalized, the key themes are listed below. The numbers are approximated until the entire analysis is complete.

- **Many Mainers do not have access to behavioral health services.** Agencies report:
 - more than 5,704 persons are waiting for mental health counseling, some up to 24 months (57% within three months)
 - more than 740 individuals are waiting for case management services, some up to 9 months (64% within three months)
 - more than 1,680 persons are waiting for services from independent providers, mostly in private practice, some up to 24 months (77% within three months)
- **Organizations report dire staffing shortages, causing a reduction and closing of services.** Agencies report:
 - 1/3rd as many behavioral health vacancies as those employed (507 vacancies:1670 employed)

- 1/2 as many mental health clinical vacancies as those employed (222 vacancies:438 employed)
- 1/4th as many case management vacancies as those employed (108 vacancies:466 employed)
- Twenty-eight agencies that provided additional details report reducing (n=8) and closing programs and/or sites (n=14) due to geographic location (primarily rural), low reimbursement rates (particularly for outpatient and school-based clinical care), changes in CMS rules, and difficulties recruiting and maintaining staff. These occurred across the continuum of care, including community-based, outpatient, school-based, residential, rehabilitation, and inpatient services.
- **Behavioral health workforce shortage will get worse before getting better.**
 - More than a third of independent providers are close to retirement: age 60 or older (n=101)
 - 50% of those age 60 and older plan to retire in the next 1-5 years
 - For every ten behavioral health clinicians entering the workforce, thirteen behavioral health providers leave the field (ABH, 2022)

Maine's behavioral health system and its clients are in clear and present danger if you apply the above percentages to the 315 licensed behavioral health organizations and 10,000+ behavioral health providers in Maine. The results above are preliminary, with exact numbers provided once further analyzed.

NASW Maine urges you to:

- 1) **Fund the Social Work Loan Repayment bill** for immediate impact on our behavioral health workforce.
- 2) Ensure that **the Social Work Compact (LD 2140) and the Act to Study the Exam Requirements for Social Work Licensing (LD 1990)** are included in the Supplemental Budget. These initiatives will positively impact our workforce in 3-5 years.
- 3) Fund the workforce initiatives outlined in the **Maine Resiliency Package** (see reference list) that will significantly impact our behavioral health workforce's numbers, quality, and diversity.

Sincerely,

Julie M. Schirmer, LCSW, ACSW
 President of the Board
 NASW, Maine Chapter
 Resident, Falmouth, Maine

Chris McLaughlin, LCSW
 Executive Director
 NASW Maine Chapter
 Resident, Herman, Maine

References:

Association for Behavioral Health. 2022, ABH Issue Brief: Outpatient Mental Health Access and Workforce Crisis.

<https://abh.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/eUpdates/ABH%20March%202022%20eupdate.pdf>

Alliance for Mental Health and Addiction Organizations, 2024, Maine's Mental Health Resiliency Package, 2024, <https://thealliancemaine.org/maine-mental-health-resiliency-package/>