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Testimony of Northern Maine General

LD 209 An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025

Neither for nor Against

January 23, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Gattine, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees.

My name is Michelle Raymond. I am the Chief Executive Officer for Northern Maine General (NMG), a not for profit social services organization that has been serving individuals throughout Aroostook County for over 117 years. Our mission is to provide individuals with the highest standards of care and help all of the people we serve enjoy life to their fullest potential. Our service area covers all of the County, but predominately the northern and central areas.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on the supplemental budget on this zoom platform. I am neither for nor against the LD 209 Act, but am here today to ask for your support to restore and allocate the funding needed for January 1, 2025, MaineCare service rate cost of living adjustments in the supplemental budget, *LD 209 An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund, and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025*.

NMG provides a wide range of services to approximately 250 individuals across a variety of specialized programs supported by MaineCare, such as long term care, behavioral health, targeted case management under Section 13, and home and community supports for children and adults to include Shared Living, Group Homes, Community Supports under Sections 18, 21, 28, and 29. In NMG's budgeting for this year, we are relying on the COLA to provide our employees a much needed and deserved wage increase to further prevent turnover.

I'm deeply concerned about the recent budgetary suspension of the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for MaineCare rates. This decision profoundly impacts Mainers, including those who receive these essential services and our most dedicated workers who provide their care and support. The suspension of COLA puts Maine's vital service system at significant risk, especially as the costs of living and minimum wage continue to rise.

Our mission is to provide individuals with the highest standard of care and help all of the people we serve enjoy life to the fullest potential.

At a time where workforce challenges continue to be a significant barrier in our communities, the failure to provide the expected COLA will likely result in more turnover that would prevent us from accepting new referrals from existing waitlists, decreasing hours of supports to current clients, and increased consideration of more program and/or group home closures. For example, since 2019, NMG has closed 3 group homes that supported 11 people due to workforce challenges and unsustainable reimbursement rates. Most of those individuals were transferred to other towns over 4 hours away from families, friends, and their familiar communities. We have and continue to review our budgets, looking for opportunities to cut costs wherever we can and becoming more streamlined throughout our organization. All of our management, including myself, have been tasked with wearing multiple hats and doing more for the same as we make efforts to continue to serve who we can.

The increased costs to do business has not been reflected in the reimbursement rates of these services over many years. We have and continue to see rising costs in the following areas: utilities, food, fuel/heat, household supplies, office supplies and technology, costs of transportation, workers' compensation insurances, general liability insurances, health insurances, and minimum wage. These increased costs, the shortage of workforce, and the increasing regulatory mandates within these programs that are already being underfunded, place vulnerable Mainers at risk for loss or further reduction of services.

For example, in targeted case management the regulations cap each case worker at a maximum of 35 clients. Most CM agencies agree that the new mandates should further reduce that ratio to no more than 30 clients per CM. The rules also don't allow agencies to discharge clients until another CM is able to take their case either within their agency or with other agencies. However due to the shortage of case managers across agencies and turnover, our targeted case management staff have been holding client cases as much as 55 cases each for a period of 2 years and not able to discharge. The Department is aware of these statistics but has not offered increased support or solutions, leaving case managers struggling to meet required timelines/procedures on behalf of their clients to assure they have access to their much needed services. Not only does this significantly reduce the time available to support each client, but it further strains the existing workforce to do more with less, adding to job dissatisfaction and turnover.

In closing, I ask that you please ***restore the January 1, COLA for all MaineCare rates in the supplemental budget.***

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony. Please contact me with any questions you may have.

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Town of Eagle Lake

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