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Testimony in support of LD 258
Resolve, to Establish a Program to Recruit and Retain Behavioral Health
Clinicians
Sponsored by Senator Stewart
March 10, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Christy Daggett. I am the Interim Chief Executive Officer of the Aroostook Mental Health Center. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in strong support of L.D. 258, *a Resolve to Establish a Program to Recruit and Retain Behavioral Health Clinicians*. I am here today to testify from my experience: Maine is facing a critical shortage of behavioral health providers. AMHC serves over 4,000 adults and children in Aroostook, Hancock and Washington Counties. Over 70 percent of our clients are MaineCare eligible. Presently, 27% of our therapist positions are unfilled. We are unable to take new referrals in our Washington County offices, and many of our Aroostook County sites cannot do a new client intake before late April. Without immediate intervention, we risk further jeopardizing access to essential mental health services for our communities.

The reality of this crisis is stark. At AMHC, behavioral health clinician positions remain unfilled for extended periods, with an average hiring time of up to 24 months for a single position. In one outpatient office alone, five therapist positions have remained vacant for two years, with only one new hire in that entire time. Additionally, turnover among LCSW's is alarmingly high, hovering around 30%. This cycle of vacancies and turnover is leaving

clients without consistent care and overburdening our remaining clinicians – affecting both quality and access.

One of the primary barriers to recruiting and retaining these professionals is the financial burden associated with becoming a licensed clinician. The average student loan debt for an LCSW in the state is approximately \$74,557. When combined with the relatively modest salaries in this field, about \$60,000 annually, this debt load discourages professionals from entering or remaining in the workforce, particularly in underserved areas like rural Maine. These incentive funds could reassure them that they can meet their debt obligations and practice the kind of nonprofit service they love.

To address this crisis, we must take decisive action. Establishing a dedicated recruitment and retention program, which could include incentives such as sign on and retention payments, would significantly strengthen Maine's behavioral health workforce. Programs like these have been successfully implemented in other states and have demonstrated clear results in improving provider retention and increasing access to care. With a stronger workforce, clinicians who today leave the field due to burn out potentially could remain to serve the people of Maine.

This is not just a workforce issue; it is a public health crisis. Every day that these positions remain unfilled, individuals in need of mental health and substance use treatment are left without support. I urge this committee to support the creation of a program that ensures we can recruit, retain, and sustain the behavioral health workforce Maine so desperately needs.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Christy Daggett".

Christy Daggett, MPP
Interim Chief Executive Officer