

LD 709 - An Act to Establish the Respite for ME Program

LD 815 – An Act to Provide Funding for Respite Care and Supplemental Services Provided by the Family Caregiver Support Program

Testimony of John Brautigam, Esq. for Legal Services for Maine Elders Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

March 14, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is John Brautigam, and I am here today on behalf of Legal Services for Maine Elders. LSE provides free legal help for Mainers aged 60 and older when their basic human needs are at stake. We support LD 709 which restructures respite care administration and LD 815 which adds needed funding.

The responsibility of caring for a loved one facing declining health is an immense and often overwhelming burden, one that thousands of Maine family caregivers shoulder every day. Despite their dedication, many caregivers struggle with exhaustion, isolation, and financial strain, often sacrificing their own well-being to ensure their loved ones receive the care they need.

Respite for these caregivers is not a luxury; it is a necessity. It provides temporary relief to caregivers, allowing them time to rest, attend to their own health, manage essential errands, or simply take a brief mental and emotional break.

As this committee knows all too well, staffing shortages exacerbate the difficulties families face, making it nearly impossible for caregivers to receive consistent outside help. This lack of support not only impacts caregivers but also affects the quality of care provided to those in need. Without adequate respite options, caregivers are at a heightened risk of burnout, depression, and physical decline, which in turn can lead to increased hospitalizations and institutional placements for their loved ones — outcomes that increase costs in public benefits and across the healthcare system.

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Investing in respite care is a cost-effective measure that keeps families intact and supports the longterm sustainability of home-based care. By providing caregivers with the relief they need, we can help prevent crisis situations that force families to turn to more expensive forms of care, such as emergency room visits or long-term nursing home placements. In addition, caregivers who receive respite support are more likely to remain in their caregiving roles longer, reducing the strain on state-funded programs and MaineCare resources.

The *Respite for ME* program had a positive impact on family caregivers and older adults. Launched under Governor Mills' *Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan*, the program aimed to reduce caregiver burden and enhance well-being by offering flexible benefits and financial assistance. Over two years (October 2022 – September 2024), the program provided \$3.4 million in grants to 782 caregivers, enabling access to respite care, assistive technology, self-care services, chore assistance, home modifications, and consumable supplies. The final evaluation report concluded that:

- The program's flexibility allowed caregivers to tailor services to their needs, reducing stress and improving well-being.
- Caregivers reported decreased feelings of isolation and increased ability to balance caregiving with personal time.
- 41% of participants were working caregivers, with a 22% reduction in reported negative work impacts and a 9% decrease in job performance issues due to caregiving.
- Testimonials highlighted how financial assistance enabled caregivers to take essential breaks, improve self-care, and strengthen relationships with loved ones.

The companion bill to LD 815 – LD 709 – integrates *Respite for ME's* successful features into Maine's existing Respite Care program, aligning it with the federally funded *National Family Caregiver Support Program* for streamlined administration.

I urge you to prioritize funding for respite care programs to ensure that families receive the support they need. Caregivers are the backbone of our long-term care system, and this investment will return benefits worth far more than the fiscal price tag.

Thank you.