

Testimony in Support of LD814 AN ACT TO PROVIDE FUNDING TO AREA AGENCIES ON AGING FOR COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES AND PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT OLDER ADULTS

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Dear Members of the Committee,

My name is Holly Zielinski, and I live in Poland. Thank you for the work you all do to represent Mainers from across the state. And thank you to Representative Cloutier and the co-sponsors of LD814 for bringing this important legislation forward.

I am the Chair for the SeniorsPlus board of directors, serving the residents of Androscoggin, Oxford, and Franklin counties. I am submitting this testimony in strong support of LD814 *An Act to Provide Funding to Area Agencies on Aging for Community-Based Services and Programs to Support Older Adults*. I will refer to this as the *Older Mainers Act*, sponsored by Representative Cloutier. The Older Mainers Act is crucial for several reasons and I will elaborate below.

I am not just a board member, I am a former employee of SeniorsPlus and was the Chief Operating Officer for 5 years, retiring in 2020. As soon as I was able I applied to become a member of the board as I wanted to continue my advocacy for the older adults and adults with disabilities in our counties, having seen first-hand the need, and how positively the services provided by SeniorsPlus impacted the quality of life for those we served.

I have spent my career working for companies and agencies that provide services to older adults and who not only help them remain independent in their homes and communities, which of course we all want, but to maintain their dignity, access to health services, and case management to allow them to continue a purposeful and fulfilling life. Regularly I was contacted by older adults looking for help, with everything from being unable to afford heat and food, to problems with Medicare or caring for an ill spouse or other loved one. SeniorsPlus and the other area agencies on aging in Maine provide these highly needed and critical services. But there is often not funding or enough funding to serve more than one need, leaving so many necessities unanswered.

The Older Mainers Act is crucial for the well-being, and in some cases the survival of some older Mainers. Good nutrition is a basic need, a basic right. Yet, there are aged individuals who do not have enough to eat.

Meals on Wheels is quite literally a life-saving, and money-saving service, yet currently more than 600 older Mainers are on waiting lists for these services. How do you tell an elderly man

that there is no money to help him, to feed him, after he has worked hard his whole life contributing to his community and society. The Older Mainers Act would allow for more than 335,000 additional meals to be provided across the state. It prevents older adults from going to bed hungry.

Meals on Wheels also helps keep people out of very expensive long-term care facilities. Poor nutrition can quickly lead to very poor health. The Older Mainers Act promotes independence and keeps older adults out of facilities because it provides hands-on, wraparound case management services. It is a safety net allowing older adults the dignity they deserve.

I have heard many stories of older adults who looked so forward to their Meals on Wheels delivery to not only get a nutritious meal but to just see someone. Everyone has heard of Meals on Wheels but what many don't understand is it is more than just a meal. Social isolation is very real and can cause not only severe depression but can contribute to many other chronic diseases. Meals on Wheels drivers are trained to have a watchful eye that something is amiss when they deliver a meal. Maybe "Mrs. Jones" is acting lethargic, or her usually meticulous house is dirty and she is unkempt. These are signs something else is going on and the driver knows to make a referral to SeniorsPlus. But alas, while we do what we can to assist or refer them to the right resource, funding is needed to continue to follow up with these older adults so they don't fall through the cracks.

Stories like this are plentiful and heartbreaking. These people deserve better. Without this critical funding we are just scratching the surface when so much more could be done for our most vulnerable population.

I urge you to support the Older Mainers Act and help us continue to provide these vital services to our older Mainers. Doing so will improve the lives of older adults and their families in Maine for generations to come. Thank you for your time, consideration, and service.

Respectfully,
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