

April 14, 2025

Testimony of Katie Rutherford, Executive Director, Frannie Peabody Center
**In Support of LD 217, An Act to Require Schools to Provide Access to Free Condoms for
Students in Grades 9 to 12 in the School Nurse's Office**
Committee Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murray, and Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Katie Rutherford and I am the Executive Director at Frannie Peabody Center, Maine's largest community-based HIV/AIDS services organization. I am testifying on behalf of the agency in strong support of LD 217 to ensure free condom access for young people in secondary schools.

As part of Frannie Peabody Center's prevention services, we offer free condoms to individuals and assist organizations in maintaining supply in partnership with the Maine CDC. Over the years, I have been in touch with several school-based nurses who were reaching out because they could no longer afford to personally fund condom distribution they had been providing upon student request. Several indicated that their administration didn't support condom distribution, so they could not publicly ask for help. This is a clear example of the dedication of school nurses in providing patient-centered care, and highlights the danger of ignoring the needs of sexually active youth.

We cannot afford to wait. Current threats to federally funded STI and HIV prevention and care programs emphasize the urgent need to expand access to sexual health resources. By providing condoms in schools—where teens already spend a significant portion of their day—we remove critical access barriers such as social hesitancy, transportation limitations, and financial constraints. No student should have to risk their health because they couldn't get to a clinic or couldn't afford to buy protection. Investing in low-cost, high-impact strategies like condom distribution is a cornerstone of sound public health policy. It aligns with CDC best practices and supports our broader goals of reducing HIV transmission, preventing STIs, and promoting informed choices.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), youth aged 13 to 24 accounted for **20% of all new HIV diagnoses** in the United States in 2022. In addition to HIV, rates of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as chlamydia and gonorrhea continue to climb among teens. In fact, adolescents and young adults represent nearly **half of all new STIs** each year, despite making up just a quarter of the sexually active population. These infections can lead to long-term reproductive health issues, stigma, and significant emotional and financial costs.

I would like to suggest an amendment to allow for the distribution of condoms and health education materials in locations beyond the school nurse's office – we know from our work in the community that some people need to access resources from spaces where they feel their privacy is protected and they can remain anonymous. With this in mind, I urge you to vote yes on LD 217 to protect the health and safety of our young people in Maine.