

Testimony on LD 1589: An Act to Improve Parity in Insurance Coverage for Outpatient Counseling Services in Maine

Good afternoon Senator Bailey, Representative Mathison, and honorable members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services,

My name is Julie Schirmer, a Falmouth resident and President of the National Association of Social Workers, Maine Chapter (NASW ME). I am testifying for NASW ME in support of LD 1589: An Act to Improve Parity in Insurance Coverage for Outpatient Counseling Services in Maine. This is one of several bills we support to improve access to mental health and addiction services in Maine. This bill involves no fiscal note and helps our behavioral health workforce provide treatment when individuals need it, preventing conditions from reaching crisis proportions requiring higher levels and costlier care.

As you have heard from me before, Maine is facing a mental health access and workforce crisis with a Department of Justice lawsuit related to access to services, and over 10,000 Mainers experiencing waits of over 7 months to procure outpatient counseling, whether from community agencies or private practitioners. MaineCare rates are set below the actual cost of care, and many providers accept MaineCare out of ethical obligation to serve their community, recognizing that current financial budget constraints dictate the rates.

Commercial insurers have a high profit margin and should be reimbursing at a higher level, closer to the cost of care. There is a high variability in reimbursement between insurers and provider types. Providers often spend time fighting for payment from commercial payors, who often deny first billing due to technicalities. Additionally, the credentialing process is lengthy and involved, as is the time to be paid on claims.

Due to these burdens, clinicians in private practice are limiting or choose not to be credentialed by or bill insurers. Clients pay out of pocket and are given “superbills” to submit to their insurance company for services provided. Clients are then reimbursed at a fraction of what they paid to their provider, on top of paying insurance premiums, high deductibles, and copays. Unfortunately, many clients do not have the financial or personal resources to follow through with such a process, leaving persons with fewer resources and likely more fragile behavioral health conditions to go without services.

This bill will free up access by improving the amount and consistency of reimbursement rates across insurers and behavioral health professionals. This bill will allow clinicians based in the schools, health, and behavioral health agencies to triage and treat persons who cannot access care otherwise, and have a larger pool of available clinicians in the community to treat the rest.

NASW ME strongly urges you to vote “ought to pass” on this bill. Thank you for allowing us to weigh in on this important bill.

Best,

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President, NASW Maine Chapter Board of Directors