



**Testimony of Kalie Hess, Associate Director
Children's Oral Health Network of Maine**

**LD 1891: An Act to Address the Dental Professional Workforce Shortage by Establishing Scholarship
and Loan Programs and Updating the Dental Care Access Tax Credit**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Public Hearing: May 5, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Kalie Hess, and I am the Associate Director of the Children's Oral Health Network of Maine (COHN). I am here today to express our strong support for LD 1891.

COHN is a network of committed individuals and organizations working toward a shared goal: ensuring that all children in Maine grow up free from preventable dental disease. Our network includes community organizations, public health professionals, dental providers, and advocates who recognize oral health as a critical part of overall health and well-being. Over the years, we have worked closely with the Health and Human Services Committee to raise awareness about Maine's growing oral health crisis, and we've been grateful for the bipartisan support for the solutions our partners have identified.

Despite those efforts, Maine continues to face a serious shortage of oral health providers, especially in rural and underserved areas. This shortage extends beyond dentists to include dental hygienists, dental assistants, and expanded function dental assistants (EFDAs). Without a robust dental team, access to both preventive and restorative care remains out of reach for far too many children and families.

We know that children with MaineCare in particular face particularly steep barriers to care. Currently, 80% of children with MaineCare do not receive even one cleaning and exam annually.¹ Investing in the oral health workforce – especially in providers who are willing to serve MaineCare patients – is not only the right thing to do to meet the oral health needs of those who need it most, it's also a smart use of state resources. Dental disease can escalate quickly, leading to emergency care needs and broader impacts on a child's health, education, and quality of life.

Similarly, our Network consistently hears from partners that recruiting and retaining dental professionals in rural areas remains one of the biggest challenges to meeting the oral health needs of their communities. As we look to expand successful models of care delivery, like bringing care to children in schools – which the legislature supported in 2022 by expanding access to the Maine CDC's

¹ Fox, K. S., Kumarage, A., McGuire, C., & Stultz, E. (2024). Assessing Maine children's access to a dental home: Dental insurance does not guarantee receipt of dental care. University of Southern Maine, Muskie School of Public Service, Catherine E. Cutler Institute, Population Health & Health Policy. <https://www.maineconh.org/assets/stock/2024-Dental-Home-Utilization-Maine-Children.pdf>

School Oral Health Program – having local partners to deliver care statewide is paramount. We are encouraged to see rural practice and service to underserved populations prioritized in LD 1891.

We strongly support the inclusion of the full spectrum of dental professionals in this bill. As we innovate to meet the needs of Maine's children, we've seen firsthand the growing importance of having more dental hygienists, dental assistants, and dental therapists available. Hygienists, in particular, are central to early prevention by helping to stop or reverse decay before it becomes serious. When they're able to intervene early, we can often avoid the need for more invasive and costly treatment from dentists. This approach makes the most efficient use of our limited workforce and helps ensure that each provider can focus on the level of care they're uniquely trained to deliver.

LD 1891 is a vital step toward building a more sustainable and equitable oral health care system. By investing in the people who provide care, we can open the door to better health for thousands of Maine children.

We respectfully urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1891.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.