



MEJ Testimony *in support of* 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

May 5, 2025

Good morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Advocacy and Programs Director for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. Our organization has decades of experience working with people with low incomes to support access to health care, food security, housing security, education and training programs, and other programs that support individuals and families in moving toward financial security so they can thrive. I'm testifying in support of LD 1891.

Dental care is health care. It's essential for our physical health, mental health, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing. MEJ has worked on improving access to oral health care for Mainers with low incomes for decades. In recent years, we worked with a range of stakeholders – MaineCare members, health care providers, and other advocates for improved access to care – to help pass a bill that created a comprehensive adult dental benefit in the MaineCare program. That bill received unanimous support in the legislature and the benefit was implemented in July 2022 along with improvements to the existing dental benefit for children. Access to oral health care due to that law has been life changing for thousands of people across our state.

There's also a financial cost to us all when oral health needs go unmet. Issues that could be easily prevented or resolved become more serious. This results in more visits to the emergency room and more expensive care being needed. For children struggling with oral health pain, their nutrition can be negatively affected, and they can have poorer educational outcomes. Adults with dental pain or tooth loss can also face nutritional deficits, poorer productivity at work, and it can even affect success with recovery for those with substance use challenges.

Unfortunately, coverage alone does not make access for everyone possible. The number one issue we hear when people need dental care is that they cannot find a provider taking new patients or the wait to get into a provider is more than a year. This issue affects those with coverage through MaineCare the most, but it is also a real challenge for people with private coverage or no coverage at all. Every week MEJ hears from clients, people in our network, or organizational partners about someone struggling to get the care they need.

I've had the honor of working with many oral health providers and experts over the past six years and have learned a lot about the state of our oral health workforce. There are many smart and dedicated people trying to advance solutions that will change the landscape of care for the better so every Mainer – no matter the type of health care coverage they have – can access this essential health care. This bill would advance some of those solutions.

By providing additional financial supports for students who commit to providing care in seriously under resourced areas of our state, we can increase the number of providers statewide and provide an incentive for those who will serve those with fewest options for care. While this bill focuses on dental deserts in certain counties, it will also help areas of our state with more providers. Right now, many Mainers in more rural regions of the state must travel to areas with greater populations in order to access care. This means people living in those areas experience longer wait-times or an inability to access care at all just like people in more rural areas.

LD 1891 is important legislation that can make a real difference to Mainers health and wellbeing through greater access to oral health care. We urge you to pass LD 1891. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions.