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Chairwoman Bailey, Chairwoman Matheson, and members of the committee.

I am Dr. Rachel Achenbach with Maine Optometry, and I currently serve as the Vice President of the Maine Optometric Association. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of LD1803 and to address a critical issue that affects our ability to provide timely and effective eye care to our community: the recruitment of new optometrists to our state.

As you are aware, and as has been thoroughly discussed in previous testimony, Maine, like many other states, is experiencing a shortage of healthcare professionals, including optometrists and ophthalmologists. This shortage leads to longer wait times for patients and limits our ability to meet the growing demand. To help overcome this challenge, we must consider expanding the scope of practice for optometrists in Maine.

At Maine Optometry, we operate seven locations throughout southern Maine, employing 20 doctors and over 100 staff members. Our wait times are currently up to three months for comprehensive examinations, indicating a clear need for more providers to reduce these delays. However, despite our willingness to expand, we face a significant challenge in recruiting optometrists, both new graduates and established practitioners, to come to our great state.

Through one committee I serve on for our state association, I have the opportunity to meet virtually with optometry students from across the country. These students are actively seeking information to help them decide where to practice after graduation. One of the most common questions I receive is, "What is Maine's current scope of practice?"

When I explain what a license in Maine currently allows, I often see their interest wane. Our new graduates have spent years training to diagnose, manage, and treat a wide range of eye conditions and are eager to practice to the full extent of their education. Upon learning that Maine restricts optometrists from performing certain advanced procedures, they quickly begin to consider other states where they can offer a more comprehensive range of services.

This limitation is a significant deterrent for prospective candidates. For optometrists looking to advance their careers and provide the best possible care for their patients, the ability to perform a full scope of practice is essential for professional fulfillment. Unfortunately, we are limited in what we can do compared to our counterparts in other states with broader scope of practice laws, causing us to lose highly qualified candidates who would be instrumental in improving patient care.

This issue is a barrier that affects our ability to meet the growing demand for eye care in Maine. To remain competitive in attracting and retaining the best optometrists, it is crucial that we address the limitations in our scope of practice. Doing so would not only help us recruit talented professionals to serve our communities but also benefit our patients by providing them with a broader range of eye care services, reducing wait times, and adding convenience.

I urge you to support this important initiative. Thank you for your attention and consideration.