

Testimony of Elizabeth Woolfolk in Support of
LD 1949: An Act Regarding Energy Fairness

Senator Lawrence, Representative Sachs, and honorable members of the Energy, Utilities, and Technology Committee. I am Elizabeth Woolfolk, and I am the Manager of Renewable Energy Planning and Policy at A Climate to Thrive (ACTT). ACTT is a community-driven non-profit that is working on a clean energy transition that prioritizes community benefits across Maine, with a particular focus on energy equity. Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to support **LD 1949: An Act Regarding Energy Fairness**.

This ambitious legislation does four critical things: protect vulnerable Maine residents from the disconnection of electrical service on the basis of nonpayment; it illuminates what operating costs can be included in rate recovery, and asserts that rates may not seek to recover costs related to advocacy in the Legislature, or the Public Utilities Commission; it requires utilities with greater than 50,000 customers to file a quarterly docket reports showing the number of disconnections due to customer nonpayment, customer electrical termination and reconnection, and customer debt to a utility, while informing customers of details related to administrative charges; finally, the bill amends size and labor thresholds for ‘assisted project’ while codifying environmental justice requirements. In discussing this bill, ACTT will focus on each section individually.

Part one of this bill protects vulnerable ratepayers from disconnection. It is necessary and mirrors existing legislation from Massachusetts. Vulnerable Mainers need electricity to survive and should not have their service terminated due to a lack of funds. Earlier this session, when ACTT provided testimony on legislation that sought to amend emergency planning protocol, we learned about LifeLight, a service that Maine’s largest investor-owned utilities utilize to serve ratepayers relying on critical medical devices. We learned that, although the LifeLight program works with vulnerable Mainers, this does not prevent the utility from terminating service to these ratepayers. LD 1949 seeks to rectify this and ensure that other vulnerable Mainers do not have to worry about having their electrical service terminated for want of money.

The second part of this bill will be critical for holding our utilities accountable to Maine ratepayers. It will ensure that our utilities use ratepayer funds to improve the service that they pay for. At a time when electricity is increasingly expensive, ratepayer payments should be used for costs related to infrastructure investment, not extraneous costs such as legal fees, political contributions, or corporate travel. Moreso, this is a time when it is clear that our major utilities are failing to adequately facilitate the energy transition that our ratepayers voted for, and are attempting to participate in. Ensuring that the grid can meet this challenge should be the priority of the utilities, and what ratepayer monies are utilized for.

Increased reporting is a critical part of LD 1949 and will ensure a higher degree of utility transparency and accountability. This bill requires customer hardship reporting from the utilities, which will provide concrete information to the PUC about how energy rates impact Mainers and customer disconnections related to nonpayment. This will provide data points that can offer transparency about energy affordability in Maine, and illustrate the impact of the crisis at hand for Mainers. Additionally, this bill seeks to create clarity around administrative charges. For Mainers who are attempting to interconnect new solar installations to the grid, the administrative charge can be an obstacle that can impact project budgets by thousands of dollars for project owners.

Finally, this bill codifies environmental justice in Maine law. On top of striving for equity, these environmental justice provisions provide strong support for a just energy transition and ensures that environmental justice populations have a voice in decisions made about our infrastructure. As an organization, ACTT strongly believes in a just energy transition and views community engagement as essential to achieve these goals. This bill offers protection, inclusion, transparency and seeks to hold our utilities accountable to the rates set for ratepayers. For these reasons, ACTT urges this honorable committee to support **LD 1949: An Act Regarding Energy Fairness.**