

Good afternoon. Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Art Blank, and I am a Board Member of Healthy Acadia, which provides public health services primarily across Hancock and Washington counties. I live in Hancock County, and I am testifying in support of LD 1772 and LD 1658.

LD 1772 creates an independent, non-partisan body of public health experts (the Maine Commission on Public Health and Prevention) who will be available to legislators as a timely resource in crisis situations, or otherwise. It will help legislators ground public health decisions with timely access to public health expertise.

The bill proposes solutions for some current state government inefficiencies and plans ahead for a stronger, healthier Maine supported by better, more cost-effective public health infrastructure. Part of the Commission's mission would be to support the Maine CDC in their mandate to create and implement a comprehensive state health plan (it hasn't been fully implemented because of lack of funding to meet existing mandates). This would help build efficiencies in state public health functioning by creating a platform to integrate the state health planning process in cross-referencing other departmental public health plans and initiatives.

A key part of this proposal is the creation of a Fund for A Healthy Maine (FHM) Stabilization Account. That account will provide funding for the creation and functioning of the Commission, in part by leveraging tobacco excise tax dollars, as described in the paragraph below on LD 1658.

If implemented in this way, the FHM Stabilization Account will eliminate the existing need for a loan from the General Fund to fund programming supported by the FHM, which will create efficiencies in the state budget. And it provides a critically-needed way to continue to fund future public health investments via a balanced FHM budget.

Maine people are resourceful, determined, innovative, independent and community-minded and the FHM reflects this, with 25 years of ongoing support - such as the protections for FHM and its programs in the current budget, for which we want to thank our legislators. But in the big picture, the FHM is threatened. The tobacco industry is finding ways around the tobacco master settlement agreement and new ways to appeal to young people and to create lifelong tobacco customers.

LD 1658 proposes to fund FHM programming via a portion of the newly revised tobacco excise tax. With new products, new advertising, and a new generation of tobacco users, tobacco use remains the leading preventable cause of disease, death, and disability in the US. Using tobacco excise tax dollars to support tobacco use prevention and other

preventative health programming in the FHM is exactly why the FHM was created. The strategies funded by the FHM are key to preventing young people from starting to use tobacco, and in preventing healthcare costs associated with tobacco-related illness.

Please vote in support of LD 1772 and LD 1658. On multiple fronts, these bills will help us to collectively build a better Maine.

Sincerely,
Art Blank