

Monique Coombs
Maine Coast Fishermen's Association
LD 2144

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Monique Coombs, and I am submitting testimony in strong support of the Resolve to Establish the Working Group to Prioritize Wellness and Mental Health Resources for Heritage Industries. I do so on behalf of the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, and also as a fisherman's wife, the mother of two fishermen, and a resident of Harpswell, a beautiful coastal town with a strong and enduring fishing community.

Through my work with the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, I get to work closely with commercial fishermen and fishing families all along the coast.

Not every working waterfront community has the same things. Not every community has a general store or a town wharf or a community school or even a harbormaster. But a few things that are familiar in every fishing community, besides wharves, nets, traps, and buoys, are stress, depression, anxiety, uncertainty, grief, and even stigma.

That uncertainty is not abstract. Fishermen are running small, family-owned businesses in an industry facing constant changes like new regulations, volatile markets, rising costs, environmental uncertainty, and increasingly unpredictable seasons. At the same time, they experience the same pressures many Mainers feel, especially in the winter: isolation, financial strain, short days, long nights, and the cumulative weight of carrying responsibility for a family, a crew, and a livelihood. Fishermen are not immune to these realities, and they feel them deeply, while working in physically demanding and high-risk conditions.

When fishermen are injured, forced off the water, or navigating this prolonged uncertainty, finding appropriate and accessible resources can be a herculean task. Maine has many outstanding support services, but too often they are not coordinated in ways that align with fishermen's needs or unpredictable schedules.

A few years ago, the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association began offering cultural competency training to students and health care practitioners to expand culturally competent resources for fishermen and to help providers better understand the stress, uncertainty, and realities of life in Maine's fishing communities.

But that's not enough.

We need a coordinated working group of experts, professionals, and representatives from the heritage industries to work together to take a comprehensive look at what is working, where gaps remain, and how Maine, how we, can do better. Whether it is lettuce, logs, or lobsters, we all depend on these industries for the goods they produce and the communities they sustain, and we owe it to the people doing this work to ensure they are supported and well.

I respectfully urge the Committee to support this resolve and to continue advancing policies that recognize the physical and mental demands placed on Maine's commercial fishing community and other heritage industries. Because, together, we persevere.