

Stacia Brough  
Norway  
LD 2212

Dear Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

My name is Stacia Brough, and I am a 44-year-old mother of four from Norway, Maine. I am here to speak in favor of LD 2212.

Before I found the support and opportunities that helped change my path, my life looked very different. I became pregnant with my first child at 17 and dropped out of school during my junior year to care for him. Two years later, my daughter was born. Being a struggling single mother was one of the hardest challenges of my life. Back in 2000, I was living on just \$550 a month from TANF assistance, while my rent was \$475. There were times when I could not even afford diapers. I knew if I wanted to provide for my children, I needed an education. At that point in my life, I was just trying to survive; I did not even think thriving was a possibility in my situation. It is hard to get ahead when you are living in survival mode

In rural communities like where I am from, this is the reality for many people; opportunities feel out of reach. Public transportation is almost nonexistent, jobs are often part-time or pay a very low wage, and accessing higher education means traveling long distances, something that is not realistic for many parents without reliable vehicles, childcare, or flexible work schedules. For families living paycheck to paycheck, even the cost of gas can be a barrier to attending classes.

Adult education, community colleges, and workforce development programs are vital to rural Maine. These programs provide more than just classes; they offer second chances. The adult education program at OHCHS helped me secure my first job and begin rebuilding my confidence. The program offered both day and night classes, allowing me to attend while being the sole caregiver for my children. I graduated in 2011 and immediately enrolled in a CNA course at our local high school, allowing me to start working right away. These community-based programs were accessible, free, and specifically designed for working adults, making it possible for me to participate.

When I began working, it felt incredibly rewarding, but unfortunately, I was still only earning minimum wage. I started at \$7.50 an hour, and after a few years, I was still only making \$10.00 an hour. I would not have made it through this period in my life without subsidized housing. I realized that if I wanted to truly change my family's future, I needed more education and better credentials.

Workforce development programs are critical to rural Maine because they are built around accessibility. Many now offer online or hybrid courses, which are essential in areas where transportation is a major barrier. When you live miles from the nearest campus, and there is no bus system, online learning can mean the difference between continuing your education and giving up. Being able to complete coursework from home allows parents like me to study after putting our children to bed, without worrying about how we will get to class or who will watch the kids.

The cost of living continues to rise; housing, heating oil, groceries, and childcare are all expensive, especially in rural areas like mine, with few jobs and low wages. When residents have the opportunity to earn degrees or certifications, they are more likely to secure stable, higher-paying jobs and remain in their communities. Most of the people who pursue education through local or online programs secure work, and they do not leave; they stay. They buy homes, pay property taxes, support local businesses, and reinvest their earnings back into the local economy. Investing in education is not just an investment in individuals; it is an investment in Maine's workforce, small towns, and long-term economic stability.

In 2024 began by taking a workforce development course at WCCC, where I earned my MHRT/C certification. Programs like this are especially important in rural Maine because they train local residents to fill high-need roles in healthcare, teaching, and social services fields that are desperately needed in our communities. Instead of

importing workers from outside the region, these programs empower people who already live here to serve their own communities.

After completing the workforce course, I felt more confident about pursuing my degree. That confidence is one of the most powerful outcomes of adult education and workforce development. It is not just about job training; it is about self-worth, stability, and hope. Now, I am working on a degree in forensic social work. My goal is to give back to the same kinds of communities and families who face the challenges I once did.

Education strengthens communities in ways that go beyond just increasing a person's income. Research consistently shows that higher levels of education are linked to lower crime rates and reduced substance use. When people have access to opportunity, stable employment, and hope for the future, communities become safer and healthier. Maine needs to invest in its people, especially in rural areas, where people are struggling to stay afloat. By expanding access to affordable, flexible education programs, we can reduce poverty, lower crime and drug rates, and build stronger, more resilient communities for the next generation of Mainers.

If we want to keep young people in Maine, we have to invest in their education and futures. More and more young adults are leaving the state because they see that there are better opportunities elsewhere. When Maine expands workforce training, online degree programs, and career pathways tied to local industries, it gives young people a reason to stay. If they can earn credentials close to home and find meaningful, sustainable employment in their own communities, they are more likely to build their lives here, start families, purchase homes, and contribute to the future of our dying towns.

Keeping young people in Maine is vital to strengthening our workforce, rebuilding our communities, supporting our aging population, and preserving the character and vitality of rural communities. These education programs are affordable, flexible, and accessible through online options and are not luxuries. These programs are lifelines and provide a way out of poverty, while strengthening the local workforce and keeping families rooted in their communities. Without these programs, many of us would never have the opportunity to move from surviving to thriving.

Sincerely, Stacia Brough