



**University of Maine System Testimony In Support of LD 2134, *An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Infrastructure To Improve Transportation and Internet Connections*, Delivered by Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations, March 12, 2020**

Senator Breen, Representative Gattine and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs – My name is Samantha Warren. I am the Director of Government and Community Relations for the University of Maine System, testifying today in strong support of overdue public investment to expand affordable broadband as proposed by Part B of LD 2134, *An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Infrastructure To Improve Transportation and Internet Connections*.

Beyond a necessity for the economic growth of our state and the sustainability of its rural communities consistent with the recent 10-year statewide economic plan, Maine's public universities believe broadband access is a fundamental issue of equity.

As you well know, Maine has thousands of job openings but not the people with the education and training necessary to fill them. By 2025, our state will need at least 60 percent of adults to have some postsecondary degree or credential, up from the 46 percent of the working Mainers estimated to have them now. With declining PK-12 enrollment, meeting this statutory State attainment goal and economic imperative requires activation of the 200,000 or so Maine adults who have some college but no door-opening degree or credential.

Many of these Mainers live and work in our rural communities where there is inadequate internet connectivity. Often they are place-bound and juggling low-wage job and family responsibilities that make it difficult to attend classes on our campuses. For these individuals, flexible distance education is often their only path to prosperity and self-sufficiency.

As Maine's public universities expand access to quality, affordable higher education and opportunity, we have seen great growth in our online programs and enrollment. More than one-half of all UMS students now use some form of distance learning, which comprised 22 percent of the total credit hours we awarded this past fall semester. For example, with healthcare employers increasingly requiring a bachelor's degree in nursing (BSN) especially for supervisory roles, practicing Registered Nurses are turning to the online RN to BSN programs offered through the Universities of Maine at Fort Kent (completely online) and Augusta (mostly online) and access to these affordable public programs is a critical component of addressing our nursing workforce shortage. Our goal is to ensure students studying online experience the same quality of learning and engagement as those physically on our campuses. Doing so is particularly

important for nontraditional students who are more at-risk and often need more support to persist to completion.

I would add that though there have been no confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Maine, our campuses have been preparing for weeks including to ensure continuity of instruction for those students whose traditional academic programming may be impacted, either because of a study abroad program cut short, a need to study in seclusion because of exposure concerns, or extended campus closures. In many cases, this will involve moving classes and labs online, another reminder of the importance of connectivity and the educational equity issues created because some students do not have adequate access at home.

Maine's current broadband infrastructure limits the University's ability to reach learners in the regions of our state where there is the greatest need to close gaps in educational attainment and grow the size and skill of the workforce. We urge you to help narrow this digital and diploma divide and widen the workforce pipeline by supporting public investment in broadband as proposed in LD 2134.