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Testimony of Libby Stone-Sterling, Director, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
Maine Department of Labor Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

Before the
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

In support of L.D. 98 "An Act to Update the Special Education Laws "

January 31, 2023

Good morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Libby Stone-Sterling and I am the Director of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation at the Maine Department of Labor's Bureau of Rehabilitation Services. The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services works to provide full access to employment, independence, and community integration for people with disabilities. I am here to testify in support of L.D. 98, *An Act to Update the Special Education Laws*.

Through its Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) serves thousands of students who receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) each year. Services to these students include Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) that, in coordination with schools, assist students with disabilities to learn about the world of work and prepare for post-secondary education, employment and independent living. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) provides opportunities for students to explore jobs in their communities through activities like employer tours, job shadows, and paid work experience. VR counselors also provide guidance and counseling to students and families and work with them to create an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) that serves as a road map to the young person's employment goals. This plan is ideally intended to build on the transition planning included in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and VR counselors often participate and give input in IEP and other school meetings to support transition planning.

L.D. 98 will strengthen that collaboration by aligning the age eligibility for special education services with that for Pre-Employment Transition Services. With a VR counselor assigned to every Maine high school, our staff are ready to work closely with our education partners to leverage VR resources and create new opportunities that will strengthen preparation for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. With many students with disabilities seeking career pathways that include Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Pre-Apprenticeship, we are also supportive of this bill's expansion of eligibility for CTE to age 22. There is a growing understanding of the importance of language and we appreciate that this bill will remove language like "Hearing Impairment" that is considered offensive to many in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community.

Thank you for your consideration of this information. I am available to attend the work session if that would be helpful.