



**Testimony by William Norbert
Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager**

In Support of L.D. 258

An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

**Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**

February 13, 2023

Senators Rotundo and Rafferty, Representatives Sachs and Brennan, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Bill Norbert. I am the Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager at the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME). I live in Brunswick and am here to testify in support of the Governor's proposed initiative related to Free Community College found on page A-137 of your printed materials and in the language section Part QQQ.

FAME is a quasi-independent state agency that provides financial solutions that help Maine people achieve their business and higher education goals. We create business and educational opportunities through our willingness to invest at greater risk based on public benefit. FAME's mission is to provide financial solutions that help Maine people achieve their business and higher educational goals. Our vision is to help create a Maine workforce with good paying jobs by focusing on the nexus of economic and educational development.

As you know, the Maine Community College System Free Community College Scholarship covers tuition and mandatory fees for eligible high school graduates who are pursuing a two-year associate degree or one-year certificate at a Maine community college, are living in Maine while enrolled and have first accepted any available state and federal grant aid. FAME supports this initiative, which would provide one-time funding of \$7.5 million in each year of the biennium for up to two years of free community college for all high school graduates in the classes of 2024 and 2025 who enroll in a Maine community college full-time. We support this effort for various reasons, including that it increases affordable access to higher education, helps to achieve our shared goal of

at least 60% of Mainers obtaining a credential of value; helps to reduce student debt; and helps to meet our workforce needs.

FAME plays a critical role in Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion in the state, as well as administering the Maine State Grant Program, which helps approximately 15,000 Maine students per year afford some form of higher education. FAFSA completion is the gateway to financial aid, the Maine State Grant, and Free Community College. The collaboration between the Maine Community College System and FAME has been important as we have helped to implement the Free College program. We have worked closely with the Maine Community College System as they rolled out their Free College Initiative, providing support at open houses as well as FAFSA training for their various staff. We believe this initiative is crucial for Maine's workforce development. More students will have the opportunity to continue their education and gain the skills needed to participate in the workforce with well-paying jobs that match their interests and talents.

FAFSA completion is closely associated with the pursuit of higher education. FAME staff works hard throughout the year to assist Maine students and families with FAFSA completion and financial aid sessions. The 2023-2024 FAFSA became available on October 1, 2022. Thankfully, due to recent congressional action, a much simpler form with far fewer questions is set to launch this fall. In addition to hosting Financial Aid Information Sessions and sharing resources to help prepare individuals to file the FAFSA, FAME offered 48 in-person and virtual FAFSA Help Sessions throughout the fall. Additionally, we provided one-to-one Zoom appointments two to three days per week and engaged in hundreds of upon-request meetings and phone calls to support FAFSA completion. As of the end of December 2022, FAFSA completions were up about 2% over last year. The most significant increase was for first-time filers (mostly high school seniors), with an increase in FAFSA submissions of about 10% over last year. Within this group we are seeing an increased number of students indicating they plan to pursue an associate degree as compared to last year. We are also seeing a decline in FAFSA filings for returning students pursuing a bachelor's degree. FAME sent reminders to former Maine State Grant recipients to file a FAFSA in January. We believe the increase in FAFSA filing percentage for the Class of 2022 over the Class of 2021 has been helped, in part, by the Free Community College Scholarship and its accompanying FAFSA filing requirement for eligibility.

We urge you to support this initiative and thereby continue for another two years the Free Community College effort critical for our workforce.

Thank you for this opportunity and I would be happy to answer any questions.