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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

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Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
LD 199, An Act to Improve the Health of Maine Residents by
Removing Exclusions to the MaineCare Program
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human Services

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Rachel Talbot Ross and I proudly represent House District 118 which is the Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakland and the University of Southern Maine Campus and I also have the distinct honor of serving as the Maine Speaker of the House.

I am honored to present LD 199, An Act to Improve the Health of Maine Residents by Removing Exclusions to the MaineCare Program, to you this afternoon as a continuation of my steadfast commitment to health equity and access to healthcare for all who call our great state home.

We currently have a two-tiered healthcare system in Maine—one divided along complex and ever-evolving immigration lines. LD 199 is straightforward legislation that would eliminate the injustices embedded in that tiered system and allow any Maine resident who is eligible for federal Medicaid, but for their immigration status, to participate in our state's MaineCare program. Simple in language, yet wide-reaching in impact, this bill will provide life-altering benefits for the individuals who gain coverage as well as their families, their communities, and their places of employment.

I begin with the premise and belief that healthcare is a fundamental human right. Maine voters seem to agree. When faced with choices at the ballot box, Mainers have made it abundantly clear that they want greater access to healthcare, not less. Federal restrictions in Medicaid were instituted in the mid-nineties and arbitrarily divided immigrants into two eligibility categories—qualified and unqualified. Following that decision, Maine's Legislature voted with bipartisan

District 118: Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale and the University of Southern Maine Campus

support to take the option to continue providing MaineCare for income-eligible immigrants. However, in 2011, the administration in power further cut access to MaineCare for many immigrants, overturning this longstanding practice of greater inclusion thus deepening racial health disparities.

As the Portland Press Herald reported in June of 2020, nowhere was this more clearly illustrated than at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when Maine held the regrettable position of the worst racial and ethnic health disparities for COVID-19 in the country. Lack of access to basic healthcare to treat and prevent underlying health conditions made our low-income communities of color, many of whom were immigrants in frontline public facing jobs, more vulnerable to the virus and less likely to seek treatment. Noncitizens are more likely to be uninsured and to forgo needed medical care because of cost than U.S. citizens. They are also more likely to work in low-wage jobs that generally do not provide healthcare benefits to their employees.

Looking beyond the lens of healthcare as a human right, making MaineCare available to non-citizen immigrants just makes common economic sense. A healthier workforce translates to a healthier economy. We are all aware of Maine's workforce challenges and labor shortages. We also know that immigration—along with education and workforce development—is a necessary part of the solution. Many of our immigrant neighbors work in some of Maine's key industries filling essential jobs in our care economy, healthcare sector, and food systems. In addition, immigrants in Maine play a vital role in our agricultural, seafood, and hospitality industries. Later today you will hear from some of those employers and learn about the workforce challenges they face.

In 2018, immigrants in Maine contributed at least \$193.9 million in state and local taxes annually. That number is certainly higher today. Yet they pay those tax dollars to support a healthcare system that they are not allowed to access. This is unfair and tragically short-sighted. The overall costs of missed workdays, lower production, and disability far outweigh the direct costs of medical care. As we wait for Congress to make the necessary federal reforms to our broken immigration system, providing healthcare to our essential workers is something we can do right now.

Access to affordable healthcare saves lives and saves in overall healthcare spending. Currently, the population that LD 199 would cover is only eligible for Emergency MaineCare to stabilize a life-threatening emergency. Patients who lack comprehensive coverage often delay or go without care until a condition worsens

and becomes an emergency resulting in more costly and resource-intensive services that place an unnecessary burdens, financial and otherwise, on our hospitals and our overall healthcare system. We must choose whether we want to pay a smaller bill upfront for prevention, primary care, and management of chronic conditions, or a larger bill when people become sicker, and the human toll becomes more tragic.

Maine will continue to utilize the federal match for Emergency MaineCare to cover the costliest emergency services. This bill also directs the state to take advantage of any future opportunities to utilize a waiver or state option to seek federal funds for some or all of the coverage the bill provides. This is a worthy investment. It is an investment in families and the future of our state. The cost of doing nothing is much greater and will result in more human suffering.

Time and again, Maine voters have demonstrated their support for greater access to healthcare. Many of us here today talk about healthcare as a human right and have made a commitment to improving our systems of care. Yet our constituents, friends and neighbors who are immigrants are still denied healthcare far too often. Mainers voted overwhelmingly to expand Medicaid and the Maine Legislature has honored the will of the voters. It is time to finish what we started and make sure all Maine residents have the healthcare they need and deserve.

The 131st legislature has a choice to make. Will we put our values into policy and practice and ensure that everyone in our state can access necessary care—regardless of age, income or immigration status? Or will we continue to disregard the needs of so many workers and our neighbors who keep our state running? LD 199 is the choice for equity, prosperity, and a healthcare system that works better for all of us.

I look forward to you hearing from those whose lives are directly impacted by the barriers to affordable healthcare and implore you to listen with respect and reverence for their experiences. I would be happy to answer any questions and appreciate the opportunity to address you today.

Thank you.