



Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women

March 31, 2023

Dear Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee of State and Local Government,

My name is Ruth Kermish-Allen and I'm honored to be here today to speak on behalf of The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women in support of LD 794. I'm joined today by many of my fellow Commissioners, but to be respectful of the Committee's time, I'm going to read a joint statement from the full Commission. Individual Commission members have submitted their testimony in writing.

First, the Commission would like to thank Senator Vitelli, former Chair of the Commission, for her leadership in sponsoring this bill and Secretary Bellows for her endless support.

In 2009, LD 236 was unanimously passed by the 124th Maine Legislature to create the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission is a nonpartisan group of appointed citizens who are dedicated to improving the lives of Maine's women and girls. Our mission is to inform policymakers on the status of women throughout the state and help promote activities that further opportunities for women. We do this primarily through the creation of a biennial report for the Legislature that reflects the current status of women and girls in Maine and aims to recommend policy options that will improve the health and well-being of women and girls. We currently have 14 members who devote significant time volunteering to ensure that policymakers have the tools and knowledge to make important decisions. However, our collective volunteer time is not enough. We are mothers, caretakers, professionals, community leaders, and advocates. We are here because we care about gender inequity in our communities and hope to support the Maine Legislature in creating good laws that work for real people.

When legislation to create Maine's Womens' Commission was first introduced during the Second Session of the 124th Legislature, the bill included administrative support, including an Executive Director. However, it was amended to reduce the number of members and eliminate any financial support. The fiscal note was stripped, and bill voted out of Committee as Emergency Legislation late in the session.

Since then, the Commission has operated without any funding and extremely limited administrative support. Without such support, the Commission cannot truly meet our important mission. Most of us work full-time jobs in addition to this work and have limited capacity to oversee the management of the Commission and to implement large projects well,



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such as research on the status of women, producing our bi-annual report, and advocating on policy.

Despite these challenges, the Commission worked hard to present a report to the 130th Maine Legislature. When drafting these reports, it was evident the Commission lacked funding and capacity to collect and analyze original anecdotal and empirical data.

Restoring a full-time Executive Director position within State Government is critical to providing the Commission the time and access to collect, analyze, and present the necessary data regarding the status of Maine women and girls. It will also help us publish our findings in an accessible way that supports policy makers.

In addition to the funding critical to support the ongoing work of the Commission, this bill also creates two additional Governor-appointed seats, representing LGBTQIA+ Mainers and young (under the age of 25) Mainers. We believe these two perspectives are fundamental to ensuring representation on the Commission reflects the variety of lived experiences of Maine women and girls.

Today, you have the opportunity to strengthen the tools available to make decisions that benefit Maine women and girls now, and into the future. I urge you to please support LD 794, to finally allow this important Commission to do the work it was intended to do when it was first introduced.

Thank you for your time.

Signed,

Kate Elmes, Trekkers, Commission Chair - Damariscotta
Fatuma Hussein, Immigrant Resource Center of Maine - Auburn
Jill Randall, Legal Services for the Elderly - Augusta
Samantha Lott Hale, Girl Scouts of Maine - Orono
Rebecca Austin, Safe Voices - Farmington
Maulian Dana, Penobscot Nation Tribal Ambassador - Indian Island
Jill Barkley Roy, EMERGE America - South Portland
Moriah Geer, Maine Equal Justice - Old Town
Jennifer Wilkey, Woodworker at Woodhull of Maine – Brunswick
Darylen Cote, Retired Educator - Caribou
Hon. Meredith Strang Burgess, former Maine State Legislator - Cumberland
Susan Mackey Andrews, Facilitator - Dover-Foxcroft
Dr. Ruth Kermish-Allen, Maine Math and Science Alliance - Appleton
Dania Bowie, Maine Women's Lobby, Maine Inside Out - Pittston
Anne Gass, Independent Historian - Gray