



Consumers for Affordable Health Care

Advocating the right to quality, affordable
health care for all Mainers.

P.O. Box 2490
Augusta, ME 04338
Telephone: 1-800-965-7476
Fax: 1-888-214-5233
www.maine cahc.org
consumerhealth@mainecahc.org

**Statement of Ceilidh Shea
Consumers for Affordable Health Care
To the Joint Standing Committee On Health and Human Services**

Speaking in Support of: LD 904, An Act Supporting the Rural Health Care Workforce in Maine

April 6, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee On Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments in support of LD 904, An Act Supporting the Rural Health Care Workforce in Maine.

My name is Ceilidh Shea and I am a Policy Advocate at Consumers for Affordable Health Care, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that advocates the right to quality, affordable health care for every person in Maine. CAHC is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded in 1988 and based in Augusta whose mission is to advocate the right to quality, affordable health care for every person in Maine. As designated by Maine's Attorney General, CAHC serves as Maine's Health Insurance Consumer Assistance Program (CAP), which operates a toll-free HelpLine. Our HelpLine, fields approximately 6,000 calls and emails every year from people across Maine who need help obtaining, keeping, using, or fixing problems with private health insurance or with accessing or affording health care services. CAHC also serves as the Ombudsman program for Maine's Medicaid program, MaineCare, and helps people apply for and navigate the enrollment process for MaineCare. It is with that background that we provide these comments.

Maine is considered the most rural state in the country, with forty percent of the state's population living in one of Maine's 11 rural countiesⁱ, which is why the establishment of this fund is of the utmost importance. It will foster greater retention of health care providers in rural areas of Maine through support of primary care workforce development. Living in rural areas is often associated with increased barriers to accessing care – due to lack of transportation, a need to travel farther distances to reach a primary care provider, or a complete lack of availability of providers. Whatever the reason may be, the overall pattern is clear: rural communities represent nearly two-thirds of primary care health professional shortage areas in the country, and this is creating enormous barriers to accessing vital healthcare.ⁱⁱ Maine is certainly no exception to this rule. In fact, only 43% of the need for a primary care provider is met in Maine.ⁱⁱⁱ A 2022 *Maine Shared Community Health Needs Assessment Report* found that access to care was identified as the second highest priority in Piscataquis County, one of Maine's most rural counties. A lack of availability of primary care providers in the country was the most frequently mentioned health concern related to access to care. It was also identified as the largest barrier to care by community forum participants.^{iv}

In a study of *Service Providers and Managers' Perspectives on Strengths, Gaps, and Priorities for Rural Health System Redesign in Washington County, Maine* providers identified insufficient workforce as a major barrier to care for rural residents. The insufficient number of clinicians in all areas and at all levels was a recurring theme described by participants. A related and frequently cited challenge was the difficulty of recruiting clinicians across most areas of care. High turnover rates were identified as detrimental to continuity of care for patients. Participants expressed the need for more funding to support

health professionals to stay locally, along with more training and residency opportunities.^v The fund proposed in this bill would support these opportunities and help increase availability and improve retention of PCPs, creating greater continuity of and proximity to care for all rural residents in Maine.

Across the country and in Maine, rural residents are more likely to die from health issues like cardiovascular disease, unintentional injury, and chronic lung disease than those living in urban areas. Rural residents also tend to be diagnosed with cancer at later stages and have worse outcomes.^{vi} Increasing the number of care providers in rural areas, through the opportunities that would be funded by this bill, can help offset these disparities across Maine. The ability to access preventative, routine primary care should not depend on where someone lives in our state. Creating funds such as the one proposed in LD 904 is a step in the right direction – towards creating a more equitable healthcare system for all Maine residents, regardless of geography. It is for these reasons that I urge you to support LD 904.

ⁱ <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/rhpc/rural-health.shtml>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-states-can-expand-health-care-access-in-rural-communities/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/primary-care-health-professional-shortage-areas-hpsas/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Percent%20of%20Need%20Met%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

^{iv} chrome-

extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/phdata/MaineCHNA/documents/county-reports/2022/Piscataquis%20County%20MSCHNA%20Report%202022.pdf

^v <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9130803/>

^{vi} <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/attracting-next-generation-physicians-rural-medicine>