

Testimony in Support of L.D. 51, 1098, 1209, 1228, 1148, and  
869

April 3, 2023

Good Day Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee.

My name is Sonja Hannington and I am testifying in support of I L.D. 51, 1098, 1209, 1228, 1148, and 869. I live in Brewer with my husband and daughters (Abby age 20 and Sarah age 18). I support LD 51 that would reinstate the religious and philosophical exemptions for vaccinations required for school attendance. Due to the current law, my daughters cannot access education in the state of Maine or access educational benefits they are entitled to.

My husband, Dave (and my children's father) is a permanently and totally disabled veteran. Maine provides 100% waiver of tuition and all mandatory fees for dependents of veterans as defined in Title 37-B: DEFENSE, VETERANS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT Chapter 7: MAINE BUREAU OF VETERANS' SERVICES. Ironically, my husband's service connected disability is a documented vaccine injury. Yet, his dependents can't use the education benefit because we don't vaccinate due to our sincerely held religious belief that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

We had always planned for our daughters to attend the University of Maine. My husband and I are both alumni. To break down the numbers, the cost to our family for two students (using numbers from UMO for the 2023-2024 Undergraduate costs):

Tuition: \$23,280

Fees: \$992

Plus, the girls planned to live at home saving approximately \$24,808 per year in housing costs.

Total: \$49,080 per year

GRAND TOTAL FOR A FOUR YEAR DEGREE/HOUSING FOR BOTH DAUGHTERS \$196,000

I literally sobbed when I found out the law changed because of what it meant for our family to not be able to access these benefits. Almost \$200,000 gone- just like that. And right when my daughters were about to start college.

That was a very bad day. In addition we're looking at schools at other states and realizing the huge cost of plane tickets for trips home and other costs such as increased tuition.

But those are only the financial costs. Many high school graduates aren't ready to leave home, especially to another state where they might not have much of a support system. My daughter Sarah is terrified of being so far away- she doesn't feel ready. She wants to be an English major, live at home and continue her job here in the community. She'll be forced to take on debt she wouldn't have had and this will affect her for decades. We flew to see North Carolina State University and she was completely overwhelmed. And we can't afford to fly to see a bunch of colleges.

My daughters are relegated to studying online if they want to use any school in Maine and live at home. They don't even have the option of community college. The degree programs they want aren't offered online anyway, and they don't want to study online anymore as was necessary during the lockdown.

My older daughter, who wants to work in education, chose to study online but is paying tuition and living at home. She would love to be studying in a traditional college so that she can meet people and take part in the university life. But she realized it would just be extremely expensive for her to go to another state and pay all of that housing and other costs. She was actually accepted to a prestigious college in Annapolis but it's \$30,000 per year and impossible. So I see her sitting in her room at a computer, just like she had to do during covid in high school. It's so incredibly sad. But she's making the best of it.

My husband was born in Maine and his family was poor. He attended the University of Maine and was a distinguished ROTC graduate (for those who don't know, that's kind of a big deal). He then became an officer in the Air Force and flew KC-135s and B-1 Bombers and is a combat veteran. He then got his Master's degree in Information Systems Management. He is a success story for his home state of Maine.

This law affects every family differently, and this is how it affects us. It is discriminatory towards dependents of severely injured military veterans and people who need the religious exemption. Abby and Sarah have lived their entire lives with a dad who is severely disabled. He felt good about being able to provide an education for them. This law has literally made this impossible.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sonja Hannington