



Department of the Secretary of State

Shenna Bellows
Secretary of State

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY Testimony of Shenna Bellows Secretary of State

Testifying in Favor of L.D. 1412

"RESOLUTION, Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine Establishing That All Maine Residents Have Equal Rights Under the Law"

April 24, 2023

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Shenna Bellows, and I am the Secretary of State. I am providing testimony in favor of L.D. 1412.

As the keeper of Maine's Constitution and 50th Secretary of State – but first female Secretary of State – I am particularly familiar with some of the ways that women and our equal status were left out of early drafts. The section of the Constitution on the Secretary's role – the office I now hold – was written entirely with "he" and "his" pronouns. Our founding statesmen could not even conceive of someone like me holding this office.

Since then, we have been making incremental progress towards gender equality under the law. In 1899 a law was passed prohibiting gender discrimination in the admission of lawyers to the bar. In 1920, the year my grandmother was born, white women gained the right to vote, and it would take decades before women of color would also be granted that same right. Maine elected their first women to the State Senate in 1926, when Dora Pinkham took office to represent Aroostook County. One year ago, many of us gathered here on the Statehouse grounds for a ribbon cutting of one of seven historic markers placed at various points to mark the journey of women's suffrage in our state.

But gender discrimination is not an historic artifact. The impact of gender-based discrimination and the lack of equal rights for women is with us today. On March 13, 2023, we celebrated Equal Pay Day, the day when the earnings of women, specifically white women, reach that which men had reached by the end of the prior year. For women of color, Black women, Latina women and Indigenous women, the pay disparities are even more striking. This is just one example of how the gender gap harms women.

We need every tool in our toolbox to fight for – and achieve – equality and to stop those who would work against it. A constitutional amendment, as proposed in L.D. 1412, is an essential tool in that fight.

I thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony, and I would be happy to answer any questions.