



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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*Testimony of Rep. Michele Meyer presenting*

## **LD 1718, An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce through Access to Higher Education**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business*

Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and members of the Joint Standing Committee for Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. I am Rep. Michele Meyer, serving Southern Maine's District 150, Eliot and parts of Kittery and South Berwick. I am very pleased to introduce **LD 1718, An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce through Access to Higher Education**.

As you know from talking with your constituents, friends, family, and employees, it's nearly impossible to find a care or support worker to care for an older loved one, a person with disabilities, or someone with behavioral health challenges. Previously labeled as "dead-end," these jobs have traditionally been undervalued, disconnected from career ladders, and ignored. While this workforce has been struggling for decades, when our overall labor shortage began to drive wages up in other sectors, workers previously in the field left for higher paying, less demanding work, leaving far too many vulnerable people without care.

The Legislature and state have taken this problem seriously and have raised reimbursement rates multiple times, instituted cost of living adjustments, launched a successful marketing campaign, hosted job fairs, created career navigators, and offered time-limited sign-on and retention bonuses. Despite these robust efforts, Maine has only stabilized the care and support workforce, not grown it.

In fact, more than a third of older people who are supposed to get services through Section 19 or 63 are getting no services or only partial services. That's 1,179 older people who aren't getting about 15,000 hours of care each week. 280 people who are supposed to receive Homemaker Services are not being staffed, and 1,200 more are waiting for the program.

Nursing homes are at 79% occupancy because of staffing shortages. Hundreds of Mainers are "residing" at hospitals because they can't be discharged to home or a facility. We are paying for the

most expensive care and older people are not getting any choice in placement, all because of our direct care workforce shortage.

Not surprisingly, we're now hearing that traditionally employed people, mostly women, are leaving the workforce to take care of older relatives, having a further negative impact on our economy.

There can be no doubt that we must continue to take action to attract workers to these jobs and to retain them in the field, and that we need to look beyond salary for incentives. LD 1718 can be a part of the solution.

This bill is inspired by the AmeriCorps Service Program that successfully entices volunteers to donate a year of service in exchange for tuition credit. The bill proposes to award a voucher for a year of college tuition to a worker who works for a year, 30 hours per week, for a participating employer. The employee can earn up to four vouchers over four years.

The idea is simple – if I can earn \$17 an hour at Burger King or \$17 an hour as a homemaker, but I can earn college tuition doing the latter, I'll choose that job and I'll stay in that job so I can pay for college. Once in the field, other steps already in place may move that person up the career ladder, making more money, while caring for different populations, but still earning the tuition.

This program incentivizes workers to try something they might not have tried, to gain experience working with people in settings they might not have considered. These skills will transfer to any health or behavioral health positions in the future, addressing some of our other workforce challenges, and increasing the person's social mobility.

I urge you to see the elegance in this solution. The bill appropriates \$500,000, not even a million dollars, because the fund will accumulate over time. Yet it has the capacity to draw in and retain thousands of new workers into the field, some of whom will use the tuition credit to move into their chosen field, while others may work just to create a legacy for a child or grandchild. With more workers, more people will get the care and support they need.

I will let the people who come after me speak to the details of the program, but I am happy to answer questions.