



In Support of LD 1718

An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

May 2, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and the distinguished members of the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in strong support of LD 1718 *An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education*.

My name is Laura Cordes. I am the executive director of the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP). MACSP is an association of more than 85 individual agencies providing a wide and diverse range of educational, vocational, residential and community supports services to thousands of Maine children and adults with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder or brain injuries so that they may live full and meaningful lives in the community. Combined, our programs support an estimated 10,000 direct support professionals across the state. In many towns we are the largest employer and an economic driver in their community.

I want to extend our thanks and appreciation to Representative Michele Meyer for sponsoring and introducing the bill today.

The workforce shortage crisis in our service sector began well before the pandemic and has not abated. Nearly all of our members rely on MaineCare service reimbursements to cover programs and staff. Two years ago the Legislature made long overdue investment in supporting a pre-pandemic initiative to tie labor costs of MaineCare direct service rates to 125% of minimum wage. This was followed last year with a codified rate setting system that provides for annual COLAs for the MaineCare rates that so many providers rely on as well.

These are significant steps in the right direction. Many rates however do not support providers to offer the competitive wages needed to keep and recruit staff. Staff loss and shortages have led to program closures and collapses throughout the state. A recent MACSP survey found that nearly half of our members are only able to staff to meet safety requirements rather than their client's full authorized needs, and nearly half of our members have temporarily or permanently closed programs in the last year leaving a growing number of adults with disabilities more isolated from the community and without the vital supports they need and deserve.

Additional incentives are needed to stabilize and grow our workforce to ensure that our most vulnerable adults and children have the vital support in place.

The Essential Support Worker Tuition Grant Program proposed in this bill would provide up to 4 education vouchers equal to a year's tuition up to \$4,000 at the University of Maine System, Maine Community College System or Maine Maritime Academy for an essential support worker employed in in-home or community support services reimbursed by the MaineCare program or another state program or a family member of the essential support worker.

It is exactly the type of incentive we need to stabilize and grow our workforce. A tuition grant benefit is a win for direct support professionals, the people who rely on them for care and support, the family members who will further their education, and for the state of Maine who will be better equipped to support the people and their families who are waiting for care now and those who will need it in the future.

Thank you for your consideration. Please reach out with any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

Laura Cordes,
laura.cordes@meacsp.org