



**Testimony of Angela Cole Westhoff, President and CEO
Maine Health Care Association**

May 2, 2023, 1:00 pm

To the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business

In Support of LD 1718

***An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to
Higher Education***

Good afternoon Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and members of the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. My name is Angela Westhoff, and I am the President & CEO of The Maine Health Care Association. We represent approximately 200 nursing, assisted living, and residential care facilities (also known as Private Non-Medical Institutions or PNMI) across the state. Our mission is to empower members to ensure the integrity, quality, and sustainability of long term care in Maine.

I am here to testify in support of LD 1718, *An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education*.

This bill establishes the Essential Support Worker Tuition Grant Program, which would provide to an eligible worker, or a member of the eligible worker's family, an education voucher for one year's tuition -- up to \$4,000 -- to an eligible postsecondary educational institution for each year the eligible worker works as an essential support worker, up to 4 years.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our industry, resulting in a nationwide thirteen-year low of long term care workers in the United States. 85% of Maine's recently surveyed facilities are facing a staffing shortage. Even before 2020, recruiting and retaining employees at long-term care facilities had been incredibly difficult.

This workforce shortage has major implications for our health care system. The lack of staff means that long term care facilities have to delay or curtail admissions. While slowly climbing, occupancy rates are still much lower than they were before the pandemic. In addition, the limited supply of workers has led labor costs to skyrocket as facilities have had to turn to extremely expensive temporary nurse agency workers. Further, lagging reimbursement rates and remarkably higher wages have been a significant factor in 15 long term care facilities closing since 2020, with a recent announcement that more facilities are closing in the coming months. Maine already has the oldest population in the United States, and we are projected to get older. Our communities need these nursing homes. Now is not the time to be losing access to these much-needed facilities.

Health care employers are disadvantaged when employers from other industries offer more pay and benefits while also typically requiring fewer qualifications for less arduous work. PHI's Direct Care Workforce State Index reported that Maine's direct care workers are paid almost \$2 less per hour than similarly skilled workers in other fields.¹ We understand it is difficult for MaineCare to raise labor reimbursement rates to match what private employers offer. Employee benefits, however, are more affordable for the state and would make a meaningful difference.

We believe expanding direct care worker benefits, as this bill does, would help incentivize more people to work in health care. By providing access to higher education, we can help attract and retain more talented and dedicated individuals in these fields, benefiting both workers and the communities they serve. This bill would not only benefit these workers directly, but also help to improve the quality of services provided to Maine residents.

I strongly urge you to support LD 1718 and help to ensure that essential support workers in Maine have access to the education and training they need to thrive in their professions. Thank you for your consideration.

¹ <https://www.phinational.org/state/maine/>. Accessed April 29, 2023.