



**Testimony by William Norbert  
Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager**

**Neither For Nor Against L.D. 1718**

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

**May 2, 2023**

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

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business:

My name is Bill Norbert. I am the Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager at the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME). I live in Brunswick and am testifying today Neither For Nor Against L.D. 1718, *An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education*.

This bill would create a new program at FAME: the Essential Support Worker Tuition Grant Program. It would annually provide up to four education vouchers up to \$4,000 each for four years at the University of Maine System, Maine Community College System, or Maine Maritime Academy for "essential support workers" employed in in-home or community support services reimbursed by the MaineCare program or another state program or their family members.

We appreciate and recognize the sponsor's concern regarding workforce issues surrounding essential support workers. If properly funded and technical language concerns and program details are sorted out, FAME could administer the program as a way of providing an incentive for individuals living in Maine to work in this critical health care field.

I would like to point out for your consideration a few areas of the bill needing clarification or resolution in our view. One issue to resolve is how, in some parts of the bill, it references "up to a year's tuition" (less any aid received) while in other parts it caps vouchers at \$4,000. Perhaps to avoid confusion any language in the bill referencing a year's tuition should be stricken? Also, does the bill intend to allow FAME to award four vouchers per year per institution or overall? This should be clarified. The program eligibility category is rather broad, as well. The vouchers can be used not just by the

essential support worker but also by their spouse or domestic partner, children, or grandchildren, as well. How should we prioritize amongst competing applications by support workers themselves and those of their family members? This may be a matter for rulemaking, but legislative input would be appreciated. Also, it is unclear to us the role the participating employer plays in the program, aside from verifying an employee's status as eligible for the program's benefits. Is the employer expected to apply to the program on behalf of the employer? May an employed worker apply for the program on their own? What if a worker is self-employed? Also, the bill states that an employer or an employee may have to repay voucher amounts if the employee does not comply with program terms. Should the employer be on the hook for the amount due through no fault of their own?

Finally, we appreciate how the bill requires a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) filing by participants and that they must first exhaust all available federal, state, and institutional aid before availing themselves of the vouchers. We think program participants should also be made aware of the recently revamped Student Loan Repayment Tax Credit, which offers up to \$25,000 in tax relief over ten years for Maine income tax filers who show proof of student loan repayments made during the course of a given year.

Thank you for your consideration of my comments and I will be happy to answer any questions.