



Testimony from the University of Maine System
Presented by UMS Director of Government & Community Relations Samantha Warren
In Support of LD 1797, *An Act to Expand Maine's Health Care Workforce by Expanding Educational Opportunities and Providing Tax Credits* — May 2, 2023

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business: My name is Samantha Warren and I am the Director of Government Relations for the University of Maine System (UMS), which supports improving Mainers' health care access and outcomes by investing in nursing education.

In 2021, our System and others successfully advocated for the Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program, established in 2005, to finally be funded. At the time, the state was short 2,250 registered nurses and projected to be behind 3,200 RNs by 2025, yet our public university nursing education programs were turning away hundreds of qualified applicants each year because of insufficient faculty and facilities.

The targeted program is already showing a strong return on your smart initial investment, which was supported by one-time Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan (MJRP) dollars. UMS nursing schools had nine full-time faculty vacancies then and today, we have just three. Nursing faculty at our public universities in Fort Kent, Orono and Augusta have been directly recruited or retained thanks to loan repayment. Meanwhile, a recent report from Maine's Nursing Action Coalition and the Maine Hospital Association noted the state's nursing shortage was shrinking, with the projected shortfall for 2025 adjusted down to 1,450 due in large part to nursing programs like those within UMS increasing the number of nurses they graduate.

With faculty salaries tens of thousands of dollars lower than those of practicing nurses, attracting new faculty to our public universities remains challenging and often we are unable to fill positions without multiple rounds of a national search. Yet thanks to the Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program, **our state is finally making real progress in faculty recruitment and retention that can only continue with ongoing funding from the Legislature.**

We also **support expanding eligibility for loan repayment to part-time nursing faculty**, as proposed by LD 1797. Because of both core faculty shortages and the tremendous value practicing professionals bring to our students' learning, our nursing programs rely heavily on part-time faculty, especially to help teach our clinical and lab courses. Finding clinicians who are interested, available and academically qualified for these part-time positions has long been problematic, and become even more so during the pandemic. For example, the University of Maine has nine part-time faculty vacancies for the fall, and 20 projected for spring 2024. Further, half of all part-time clinical and lab instructors across the state do not meet the minimum Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree requirement set by the Maine State Board of Nursing.

The opportunity for loan repayment for those who serve as part-time faculty will increase their education and earning potential, while addressing the critical clinical and lab instructor shortage that prevents nursing schools from growing enrollments. Part-time faculty can remain at the point of care where our nursing shortage is severe, while also providing their clinical expertise where nursing programs need it most.

Additionally, we are confident that **incentives for providers to serve as preceptors will benefit our students while improving Mainers' access to quality care especially in rural**

parts of the state. We know that our health care graduates are most likely to live and work where they had positive clinical experiences and made meaningful professional and personal connections. Yet providers in rural regions often cannot support clinical placements for students due to space constraints and precepting reducing the number of patients a provider can see and thus the revenue they generate. The funds proposed by LD 1797 appropriately **help to offset revenue losses associated with training students and ensure Maine's future healthcare workforce has exposure to diverse practice settings.**

Finally, despite **our System's national leadership in keeping door-opening postsecondary education and workforce training affordable and accessible — including holding tuition flat eight of the past 12 years —** we know many of our students have serious financial need. While **UMS has decreased our students' borrowing by 22.6% over the last five years,** investments to make permanent the pilot Maine Health Care Provider Loan Repayment Program would help our graduates more easily discharge their debt, especially those who choose to work in rural areas where wages may be lower but the need is high for health care providers. We would encourage this Committee to consider whether \$75,000 is the appropriate maximum loan repayment amount, or if that should be reduced so more Maine providers can benefit. For context, the average student debt of those who complete a bachelor's degree from UMS and have student debt is about one-third this amount, though many students graduate with zero debt.

As the Legislature prioritizes policy and investment to grow the size and skill of the state's workforce, you should be confident that your **strategic investments in UMS are paying off for Maine and catalyzing corporate, private and other giving.**

Last week, the University of Southern Maine opened its new nursing simulation lab that replicates both hospital and home care settings. This state-of-the-art, 6,000-square-foot facility will allow Maine's largest nursing education program to enhance hands-on healthcare workforce training and expand student enrollment by 20%. It was made possible thanks to public investment in our System from a 2018 general obligation bond, and private donations including from the Boyne Family of Freeport. Meanwhile, a new immersive nursing sim lab is under construction at the University of Maine at Fort Kent, utilizing MJRP funds awarded to UMS by Gov. Mills and the Legislature. This too will allow for expanded program enrollment and ensure UMFK nursing graduates have the skills to deliver safe, effective patient care in rural Maine.

We are also pleased to share with you that last week, U.S. Senators Susan Collins and Angus King advanced a Congressionally Directed Spending request from UMS, known as an earmark, that will enable UMaine to launch northern New England's first nursing Ph.D. program, which is necessary to produce the doctorally prepared nursing faculty required to train bachelor's and master's nursing students in the state. Similarly, our Senators also requested CDS funding for the University of Maine at Augusta to relocate its nursing program, which has grown from 88 to 320 students over the past five years, into a larger facility that would immediately allow for a 20% further enrollment increase.

We thank them, and you, for ongoing support of our public universities, which are collaborating and innovating in new ways to meet Maine's need for more highly qualified health professionals to care for our aging state. We urge you to further invest in our future health care workforce and the health and wellbeing of Maine people by supporting LD 1797.