

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Kalie Hess, I live in Southwest Harbor, and I'm here to testify in support of LD 1837

I want to help make the systemic challenges we are facing in our oral health system real by sharing with you my own experience, and demonstrate the extent to which our oral health system is crumbling, even for people with relative privilege like me and my family

I have federal employee dental insurance through my spouse and I work in the oral health field so I have a deeper understanding than most about how and when to access services for me and my children. I have complete flexibility in my job – particularly for dental appointments! And, I have had routine dental coverage and a dedicated dental home for my whole life

Then one thing changed we moved to Hancock county in 2022 to be closer to family. This one life change had the impact of totally discharging my family from the dental system that I had always been able to rely on. All of a sudden, no longer an established patient with a dental home, I was waiting years for a dental cleaning. I called a colleague and we explored other ways that I could get a cleaning while waiting for my new dental home to be established. I called about 8 independent practice dental hygienists who were booking out as far as my dentist or who were not taking new patients. Fortunately, my colleague recommended I try getting a hygiene appointment at the University of Maine at Augusta Dental Hygiene School and it was one of the best dental experiences I have had – but it required taking an hour and a half to drive there and the appointment took 4 hours as it was a teaching experience for the student.

Furthermore, it has been incredibly challenging to break into the dental system with new children. When my daughters were 6 months old I began trying to get an appointment for their first visit, which ultimately wasn't able to happen until they were about 16 months old. Being able to get routine preventive care requires getting on wait lists and calling our dental practice to beg them to at least place some fluoride varnish on my girls' teeth in between long gaps in hygiene appointments. Our dental practices are completely full already, yet children are being born every day and there are few, if any, slots for them to enter into care and receive the prevention that we know is critical to preventing dental caries.

I know that the true impacts of LD 1837 are not immediately clear. For me, I see incredible potential to support the Maine CDC and MaineCare to really begin to fix the systemic issues in our oral health system that are even impacting me, despite having a significant amount of privilege in navigating getting oral health care. From my work at the Children's Oral Health Network, I know that these issues are solvable. Yet, it takes capacity and commitment from the State in order to bring to scale the solutions to ensure that oral health care is readily accessible for all.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony. I'm happy to answer any questions.