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**Statement of Selam Runyon-Baruch
New Mainers Public Health Initiative
To the Joint Standing Committee On Health and Human Services**

Speaking in support of: LD 1955, An Act to Require Hospitals and Hospital-affiliated Providers to Provide Financial Assistance for Medical Care

January 17th, 2024

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Selam Runyon-Baruch. I live in Westbrook, Maine, and I'm here to speak in support of LD 1955, "An Act to Require Hospitals and Hospital-affiliated Providers to Provide Financial Assistance for Medical Care."

I am Director of Development and Community Engagement at New Mainers Public Health Initiative, which serves as the leading health related, community-based organization directly serving the needs of the immigrant and refugee youth and their families in Maine.

When tackling the medical debt problem in Maine, it is critical to acknowledge the considerable influence it has on the socioeconomic determinants of health. Individuals' impediments to getting free care have far-reaching consequences for our community's well-being.

Our team of community health workers often see clients who have difficulties in applying for and receiving free care. Barriers to accessing free care affects their social determinants of health, such as affording basic needs. We support community members who qualify for free care but end up in collections due to a lack of effective communication about what services are or are not covered under the program. This lack of clarity makes it extremely difficult for people to access the care they need. It not only puts an unnecessary burden on their finances, but also impacts their mental and emotional health.

Some of our community health workers has worked with people who have received unexpected medical bills even though they qualified for free care. One client was not informed at the hospital that the lab work she needed was not included in free care. She informed the hospital that she was enrolled in and using free care and was told she would not receive a bill for the services provided. However, a little while later, she was sent a bill she could not afford to pay.

It is critical to recognize that medical debt is more than simply a financial burden; it has a direct influence on the social determinants of health. Individuals with medical debt frequently struggle



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to satisfy basic needs – such as affording heat, groceries, gas, and childcare – resulting in negative consequences on overall health. LD 1955's objectives are consistent in reducing these effects and laying the groundwork for a healthier and more resilient community.

LD 1955 is critical to tackling Maine's medical debt issue, which can result from some of the stories I have mentioned. This law makes substantial strides toward a healthier and more equitable future for all Mainers by extending eligibility for free care to 200% of the federal poverty level, enhancing accessibility, protecting patients from unfair collection efforts, and boosting transparency.

I encourage you to support LD 1955 in order to reduce medical debt among Maine citizens and build a more equal healthcare system. Thank you for your time and attention.