



**University of Maine System Testimony in Support of
LD 284, *An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Maine Workforce,
Research, Development and Student Achievement Institute*
Presented by UMS Director of Government Relations Sam Warren, Jan. 22, 2024**

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Commerce: My name is Samantha Warren and I am the Director of Government Relations for the state's largest driver of educational attainment and economic development, the University of Maine System (UMS), and a proud alumna of the University of Maine at Farmington and the University of Maine. I am here today to testify in strong support of LD 284, *An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Maine Workforce, Research, Development and Student Achievement Institute*.

As you are well aware, in 2021, your predecessors unanimously supported establishing a new partnership between UMS and this Committee through which university researchers would conduct nonpartisan research and evaluation regarding programs and policies related to business regulation, economic and workforce development, and other areas within your jurisdiction. Modeled after a nationally recognized 25-year collaboration between UMS and the Legislature's Education & Cultural Affairs Committee (the Maine Education Policy Research Institute), this initiative had broad support, including from the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development and the State Chamber of Commerce. It ultimately garnered \$200,000 in one-time funding off the special appropriations table for a three-year pilot period.

There have been unexpected challenges to getting what UMS refers to as the Maine Economic and Workforce Advancement Research Institute (MEWAR) meaningfully off the ground. This Committee's appointments of a statutorily required steering committee were delayed by one year and months later, the lead economic researcher assigned to the project left UMS to join the State Economist's office. It took more than two years after Governor Mills signed the enabling legislation for UMS to finalize the MEWAR contract with the Legislature, and we have not yet received payment for the first project that we presented to you this fall — the comprehensive labor market analysis and corresponding online dashboard available at <https://econdatavizme.com/>.

LD 284 would remove the sunset clause and allow the university to continue its work on your behalf and for Maine's benefit. Importantly, it does not include a request for additional appropriation but instead allows UMS more time to both conduct research — utilizing the unspent funds approved in 2021 — and to continue to develop a structure to sustain and strengthen this partnership with you.

UMS remains as committed to MEWAR as ever and we are confident this collaboration can be successful. The Committee's overwhelmingly positive response to our initial research project reinforced the need and value of nonpartisan expertise and analysis that public university researchers like University of Maine Associate Professor of Regional Development Dr. Andrew Crawley can uniquely provide policymakers and the public. It also fostered real-world research learning experiences for students, including UMaine graduate assistant Ellie Hunt, that will well-prepare them for future careers in the Maine workforce.

In late November, the university met with the MEWAR steering committee and other stakeholders, who shared your excitement about the potential utility of the labor supply and demand dashboard and were eager to see it further developed. Additionally, they were eager for other research — including studies pertaining to labor force participation, workforce retention best practices, in-migration and skill transferability — that the university could undertake if the arbitrary sunset was removed, as proposed by LD 284

Finally, I am pleased to share that after three rounds of a competitive national search, UMaine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center has hired the Economic Development Research Associate that will assist with MEWAR, as well as other research and economic development activities. This position, an increasingly engaged steering committee, the upcoming refresh of the State's 10-year economic strategy and a long-term legislative commitment if LD 284 passes and future funding is provided create the conditions for MEWAR to realize its full potential, and for Maine-based data to drive more of your decision-making.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the Maine Economic and Workforce Advancement Research Institute and the opportunity to testify today. I welcome your questions.