



**Testimony of Jena Jones on Behalf of
Maine's Essential Care & Support Workforce Partnership**

Relating to LD 2214

Delivered on February 26, 2024

Greetings Senators Rotundo and Baldacci, Representatives Sachs and Meyer, and members of the Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services,

My name is Jena Jones, and while I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA), I am testifying today on behalf of Maine's Essential Care & Support Workforce Partnership. The Partnership is opposed to the cuts to the Medicare Savings Program in LD 2214, and also urges the Committees to make additional, and critically needed investments in Maine's Essential Care and Support workforce.

As you know, Maine has been struggling with a severe, pervasive, and growing essential care and support workforce crisis for more than a decade. Essential care and support workers are people who provide care and support to older people, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, and people with behavioral health challenges, both in the home and in residential care and treatment settings. These Committees and this body have taken many actions over the last decade to address these challenges.

One of the most critical things you've done over the last few years is invest in this workforce. Setting the labor portion of reimbursement rates at 125% above minimum wage has helped to stem the loss of workers to other industries who can pay significantly more and offer better benefits. While a critically important step, we find again that we are losing significant ground in this workforce and that we must take more action to recruit and retain workers.

Just last week, the Department of Health & Human Services provided its AAAA report to the Health & Human Services Committee. Buried on page 17 of that report is some very bad news. In nearly all state-funded and Maine-care sections related to the care of older Mainers, the percentage of members receiving less than all of the Personal Support Services and Nursing hours increased since last year, several significantly. For instance:

- Section 19 went from 33% in 2022 to 50% in 2023
- Section 96 went from 47% in 2022 to 62% in 2023
- Section 63 went from 53% in 2022 to 71% in 2023
- Occupancy rates in Residential Care facilities declined from 86% in 2022 to 73% in 2023

Beyond state funded and MaineCare programs, we know too many older Mainers are challenged to find and afford care and support services at home and in community settings, either for themselves or a loved one. According to AARP, Maine has the second-highest cost of home care

in the country.¹ Regardless of whether in-home care is paid for out of pocket or by the state, the fact remains that we need to take more action to grow this workforce if we want to ensure people can find the care and support they need, and are entitled to.

The Governor's proposed Supplemental Budget does not currently address the direct care workforce crisis. We urge you to take action toward continued improvements by funding and including LD 1718, *An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education*, in the Supplemental Budget. LD 1718 remains on the Special Appropriations Table.

This bill would create an education benefit of \$4,000 awarded to eligible full-time direct care workers to be used at any of Maine's community colleges, the University of Maine System, and the Maine Maritime Academy. The benefit can be used to cover tuition, books, technology, even transportation or housing costs *and* it offers the worker an opportunity to create a legacy by allowing the benefit to be transferred to their spouse, child, or grandchild.

Data collected from both workers and providers show that this program would be of great value to entice workers into the field and to help keep them working. The first year's fiscal note is \$60,000 with subsequent appropriations of \$500,000/year until the fund is capped at \$8 million.

To help older Mainers who don't qualify for MaineCare or state-funded programs afford to pay out-of-pocket for the care they need, we urge you to reject the Governor's proposal to cut eligibility for the Medicare Savings Program.

Last session, the Legislature took an incredible step to address the financial insecurity of older Mainers by funding expanded eligibility for the Medicare Savings Program, a program that saves lower-income older people on the costs of Medicare premiums. This historic action would have put between \$2,000 and \$7,300 back into the pockets of tens of thousands of older Mainers.

What does this mean in real terms? The Bath Brunswick Respite Program provides respite services to people with dementia at a cost of \$17 per hour. \$2,000 would allow a care partner to take their loved one to this respite program for 3 hours a week, 40 weeks a year. This would be a lifesaver for that care partner, but completely unaffordable without the extra help from the MSP program.

We urge the Legislature to reject cuts to MSP proposed in the Governor's Supplemental and to provide newly eligible older Mainers with the vital assistance that MSP offers. I also urge you to include funding for LD 1718 in the Supplemental Budget. We have the resources to fund these programs and they are sound investments in our workforce and the health of our people.

Thank you for these considerations. I am happy to answer any questions.

Jena Jones

¹ <https://ltsschoices.aarp.org/scorecard-report/2023/states/maine>