



Mike Tipping
Senator, District 8

THE MAINE SENATE
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3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Sen. Bailey, Rep. Perry and members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee, my name is Mike Tipping, and I represent Senate District 8 in central and northern Penobscot County.

I'm here to testify in strong support of LD 2175, **An Act to Improve Access to Affordable Prescription Drugs in Underserved Areas**. I want to thank the bill's sponsor, Senate President Troy Jackson, for introducing this important bill. He and I share a deep commitment to making health care for affordable for all Mainers.

When Rite Aid announced the closure of 400 to 500 of its pharmacies, experts expressed concerns that people who live in rural areas would find themselves in "pharmacy deserts," or neighborhoods without easy access to a drugstore.¹ Maine, being a majority-rural state, would not be immune to this crisis. When the big drugstore corporations make their decisions, they often use profit – rather than patient need – as the determining factor. As a result, the stores in smaller, rural markets disappear, leaving patients without a pharmacy in their community.

Fortunately, the State has some power. When Walgreens closed two of its stores in Washington County and declined to report the closures, the Maine Board of Pharmacy fined the corporation \$10,500.² The State requires that drugstores report store closures to the Board, if the store does not remain open for a minimum of 40 hours per week. In 2022, Walgreens paid \$68,000 in fines, and CVS passed \$13,500. Despite this penalty power, we have to do more.

Mainers are facing a critical shortage of access to affordable medications, especially in rural and underserved areas served by Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). That is why it is essential to provide immediate funding support for FQHCs to develop and expand pharmacy services in Maine.

In recent years, FQHCs have faced increasing difficulty ensuring that their patients have access to pharmacy services. Throughout the state, including in my district, FQHCs are seeing a dramatic decline in the number of retail pharmacies, as well as a reduction of hours for those still in operation, due to ongoing workforce and economic challenges.

¹ <https://www.pressherald.com/2023/10/17/rite-aids-bankruptcy-plan-stirs-worries-of-new-pharmacy-deserts/>

² <https://themainemonitor.org/walgreens-fined-for-violating-closure-requirements-at-two-washington-county-pharmacies/>

FQHCs want to be able to provide the critical pharmacy services to the communities that they service, yet existing health center revenues and resources are insufficient to support such development or expansion of current services.

LD 2175 would establish a grant program, overseen by the Office of Affordable Health Care, to provide support for FQHCs to develop or expand their capacity to provide greater access to affordably priced drugs for their patients by increasing FQHCs ability to deliver pharmacy services to those patients.

The funding provided by this legislation would enable FQHCs to develop or expand in-house pharmacy services, hire much-needed pharmacy staff, and expand availability of automated pharmacy systems, among other things, with an added benefit of increasing overall coordination within the patient's care team.

We are at a crisis point and it is essential to provide immediate funding support for FQHCs to develop and expand pharmacy services in Maine.