

State of Maine | 131st Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services
Testimony of Darcy Shargo on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association
February 29, 2024

Supporting:
LD 2175, "An Act to Improve Access to Affordable Prescription Drugs in Underserved Areas"

Sponsored by President Jackson

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services, I am Darcy Shargo, Chief Executive Officer at Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA).

MPCA is a membership organization representing Maine's Community Health Centers (CHCs), also known as Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). Maine's CHCs make up the largest independent primary care network in the state, providing high quality and equitable primary and preventive medical, behavioral, and dental health services for over 200,000 people (or 1 in 6 Mainers) at more than 80 service delivery sites around the State.

On behalf of the community health centers across the state, I come to you today respectfully to ask for your support of LD 2175, legislation that will provide much needed resources for health centers to improve access and expand pharmacy services in Maine.

As I am sure you know, Mainers face a critical shortage of access to affordable medications, especially in rural and underserved areas served by CHCs. Throughout the state, CHCs are seeing a dramatic decline in the number of retail pharmacies, and a reduction of hours for those still in operation, due to ongoing workforce and economic challenges. As is common of health centers, the CHCs want to build and expand pharmacy services to the communities that they serve; however existing health center revenues and resources are insufficient to support such development or expansion of current services.¹

As reported in the *Bangor Daily News* in the fall of 2023, state regulators fined Walgreens for multiple days of unreported closures at locations in Machias and Calais.² This is just one example of the barriers to access that we are facing in the most rural parts of our state. Across the state as pharmacies close or reduce hours, patients are unable to receive much needed medications. I am joined today by leaders from Maine's CHC Network, and I know that they will be able to speak to the real-life impacts that pharmacy access issues are having for their patients in communities across the state.

LD 2175 would establish a grant program, overseen by the Office of Affordable Health Care, to provide support for CHCs to develop or expand their capacity to provide greater access to affordably priced drugs for their patients by increasing CHCs' ability to deliver pharmacy services to those patients. One way to improve access is by setting up in-house pharmacy services, allowing for the added benefit of increasing overall coordination within the patient's care team. The effects of this legislation would also

¹<https://geigergibson.publichealth.gwu.edu/community-health-centers-financial-jeopardy-without-sufficient-federal-funding>

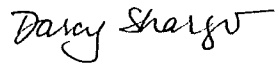
² <https://www.bangordailynews.com/2023/10/02/down-east/walgreens-machias-calais-pharmacies-closures/>

allow FQHCs to address workforce issues related to pharmacy operations in their local communities by hiring much needed pharmacy staff.

Maine has reached a crisis point in its ability to provide patients with access to affordable, life-saving medications. It is essential to provide immediate funding support for Maine's FQHCs to develop and expand pharmacy services throughout the state.

We appreciate your consideration of our comments and thank President Jackson and the other cosponsors for bringing this important legislation forward. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly with any follow up questions.

Sincerely,



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Walgreens fined over closures at 2 Washington County pharmacies

by David Dahl, The Maine Monitor and Emmett Gartner, The Maine Monitor
October 2, 2023



This June 25, 2019, file photo shows a sign outside a Walgreens Pharmacy in Pittsburgh. Credit: Gene J. Puskar / AP

Walgreens has been fined \$10,500 by the state because two of its Washington County pharmacies closed without notification, as regulators continue cracking down on unreported closures and the chain begins to shutter other locations in Maine and around the nation.

Walgreens agreed to pay the penalty for 11 days of unreported closures between February and December 2022 at its site on Dublin Street in Machias, and for six days of closures between May and September 2022 at its North Street store in Calais, state records show.

The Maine Board of Pharmacy regulators said they began investigating after receiving complaints last December about “frequent closures” at the stores. The regulators said the company violated a requirement that it reports to the board if a store deviates from remaining open a minimum of 40 hours a week.

The Maine Monitor reported in November that Walgreens paid \$68,000 in fines last year for violating state staffing and operating hours laws at 10 Maine locations. At the time, CVS was the chain with the second-highest number of penalties in the state, with four cases and \$13,500 in fines.

Several previous violations also stemmed from failing to remain open a minimum of 40 hours a week, the Monitor reported. Others targeted a rule that the stores have a pharmacist in charge.

The Monitor previously reported some pharmacists complained they are overworked and understaffed. There are also continuing complaints of a shortage of pharmacists.

Meanwhile, Walgreens, which operates approximately 9,000 stores nationally, announced earlier this year it plans to close 150 U.S. locations by next August.

The Bangor Daily News reported earlier this month a Walgreens store in the Piscataquis County town of Guilford laid off 12 employees when it permanently closed Sept. 18.

Walgreens operated the only pharmacy for the town of 1,267 residents on the Piscataquis River, with the next-closest pharmacy six miles east in Dover-Foxcroft.

Even before Walgreens announced the closure of its Guilford location, Wendy Denney, a local bed-and-breakfast owner, noticed lapses in staffing and inventory that made it difficult for her to receive vital diabetes medications.

Denney said Walgreens didn't keep the medications she needed adequately stocked, and even when she tried to ensure the pharmacy had her prescriptions on hand well in advance, the medications wouldn't be there when she went to pick them up.

"I would often run there to pick up my meds because I would get a message on my phone [from Walgreens] saying the med was ready," Denney said. "Then I would go to pick it up and they'd be like, 'Oh, well, we're out of this med. Come back later.'"

The pharmacy became so unreliable that a couple of months ago, Denney switched to an online program to get her prescriptions delivered by mail.

"I realized I couldn't rely on Walgreens to have the prescriptions when they were supposed to have them, even though they were repetitious prescriptions," Denney said.

In a sign of worker unrest in the industry, pharmacists in at least a dozen Kansas City-area CVS pharmacies did not show up for work for two days in September, the Associated Press reported. They planned to be out again last week until the company sent its chief pharmacy officer with promises to fill open positions and increase staffing levels, the AP said.

This story was originally published by The Maine Monitor, a nonprofit and nonpartisan news organization. To get regular coverage from the Monitor, sign up for a free Monitor newsletter here.