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**Testimony in Support: LD 241, AN ACT TO AUTHORIZE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION TO APPROVE RATE ADJUSTMENTS FOR LOW-INCOME WATER UTILITY RATEPAYERS**

Chairs Lawrence and Sachs and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology. I am Alf Anderson, Associate State Director for Advocacy and Outreach for AARP Maine. AARP is a non-profit, non-partisan social mission organization with more than 200,000 members across the state. We work on a range of energy issues at the state level. The core principles we approach this work with include affordability, reliability, and accountability. We support low-income energy assistance programs.

AARP Maine supports this bill that authorizes the Maine PUC to approve low-income bill payment assistance programs for water utility ratepayers. Water is essential for drinking, cooking, basic hygiene, and sanitation. Community health and prosperity depend directly on a sufficient supply of clean water. Almost every community in the U.S. has seen water and sewer rates rise dramatically in recent years. According to one study, the average water and sewer bill in the 50 largest U.S. cities increased by 31 percent between 2012 and 2019. Rising rates pose a hardship for many older people and households with fixed or limited incomes. Furthermore, consumer debt related to water and sewer bills is a growing problem. Water and sewer rate increases are driving up this debt, as well as inefficient or leaky plumbing that may be found in older homes and apartments. Household water and sewer debt can result in disconnection of service and, at worst, evictions and foreclosures.

Our AARP policy supports assistance programs to ensure that all households with low incomes can afford adequate water and sewer service. These programs should be fully funded. Customers should automatically be enrolled in water assistance programs when they enroll in other income-based financial assistance programs with similar qualifying criteria.

As to the proposed amendment circulated on January 29<sup>th</sup>, we would not be in support of this language since it would only allow a low-income program if the water utility were to propose it. This would eliminate the option of allowing the Commission to review and approve (or not) a proposal made by the Office of the Public Advocate or consumer groups.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our views on this important bill. If you have questions for us, you can contact me at [aanderson@aarp.org](mailto:aanderson@aarp.org) or at 207-330-1147.

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