

Testimony of Makayla Wrigley, Direct Support Professional

LD 210 *An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025*

Neither for nor Against

February 12, 2025

I am writing to *strongly* urge you to restore funding for the January 1, 2025, cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) for MaineCare services in the supplemental budget. The recent announcement by the Department of Health and Human Services that these adjustments will not be implemented without additional legislative appropriations is, quite frankly, a *disaster in the making*.

Let me introduce myself. I'm a 20-year-old psychology student, deep in the trenches of direct care work, running on caffeine and passion. I have invested countless hours—heart and soul—into this field, not just because I love it, but because it *matters*. Waking up every day with the goal of improving lives is an incredible feeling, and watching the people I support achieve goals they set for themselves is the most rewarding gig I could ever dream of.

I grew up in Aroostook County, a place where you pick rocks in potato fields from the time you're physically capable until you either buy your own tractor or move away from the big skies and farmland. I was raised by a mother who worked tirelessly to provide for my two brothers and me after my father struggled with bipolar disorder and alcoholism. Watching her resilience and sneaking into her Freud books as a kid made me determined to follow in her footsteps. At 18, I worked 50 hours a week between Walmart, a local café, and playing guitar gigs just to save up and chase a future beyond the County. That drive brought me to Farmington, where I now study psychology, write for newspapers, advocate for the people I serve, and do my best to create an environment where growth, trust, fun, and vulnerability can thrive. (Psych nerds like me know these things are way more connected than most people realize.)

I can confidently say that Maine was never my original plan. I wanted to be a brain surgeon in Boston, ideally married to a Bruins player. Then I started section 28 services, studying psychology, and working full-time as a DSP, and everything changed.

And yet, here I am, working three jobs *while* being a full-time student—because let's be real, nobody goes into this field to get rich. Despite working as hard as humanly possible, I still can't afford an apartment, rental, or housing in the foreseeable future. If I can't make ends meet, what does that say about the state of the direct care workforce?

I knew I was meant for this work the night I sat around a table with four residents, playing guitar and singing Tom Petty together. That was the greatest concert I'll ever play. And it reminds me of one of his lyrics: "*You don't know how it feels to be me.*"

You don't know how it feels to be a direct care worker watching clients thrive while knowing you might not be able to afford gas to get to work next week. You don't know how it feels to hold someone's hand through a crisis while worrying about how to stretch your last paycheck. You don't know how it feels to love this work so much that you give it everything—only to be told there's just not enough funding to keep wages livable.

So, here's my challenge to you: Spend a day as a DSP, and then try to tell me that these absolute angels on earth deserve anything less than a livable wage. Maine is already facing a direct care workforce shortage. COLAs aren't just important—they're *essential*. They help retain staff, keep vital programs running, and provide stability for some of our most vulnerable community members. Oh, and did I mention they're legally required under Maine law (22 M.R.S.A §3173-J and §7402)?

I urge you to *do the right thing*. Prioritize funding for the 2025 COLAs and make sure MaineCare services remain viable. Because if the people doing this critical work can't afford to stay in it, we all lose.

Thank you for your time, your commitment to Maine residents, and (hopefully) your vote to restore this crucial funding. Now, go listen to some Tom Petty and think about how great it feels to support the people who keep this state running.

Makayla Wrigley

DSP/PS1 | LEAP Community