

**Testimony in Support of the Biennial Budget - LD 210
February 12, 2025**

Good afternoon, Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine and Meyer, and esteemed members of both the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Amy Cohan. I am a resident of Portland, a clinical social worker and Senior VP of Outpatient and Community Services at Spurwink.

At Spurwink, we provide behavioral health and educational services to over 10,000 Maine children, adults, and families through the good work of 1,000 trained professionals. Spurwink values the investments and improvements that have been made to Maine's behavioral health system in recent years. We are also realistic that there are many competing priorities at work in creating a budget. We do strongly believe in continued investment in critical mental health services that serve all Mainers.

First, I'd like to address MaineCare. As we know, MaineCare serves the most vulnerable in our communities; people in poverty, people with disabilities, older adults. This program supports the essential dignity of all Mainers to access the care and treatment that they need to lead healthy, productive lives. For this reason, we are supportive of the \$122 million per year, for a total of \$244 million in funding, to stabilize MaineCare across the biennium. These are crucial funds for Maine people.

However, across many MaineCare services, our behavioral health workforce is struggling to keep up with increased demand for mental health and substance use services. Many of Spurwink's programs have lengthy waitlists. This is a difficult reality, as we are committed to providing these services and it is a core part of our mission. In fact, 75% of our clients qualify for MaineCare and MaineCare represents two thirds of our annual budget. More importantly, the numbers reflect the many people whose behavioral health needs are being met through the work of our caring, trained professionals. The numbers represent toddlers with autism who, after attending our preschool, can enter public kindergarten ready to learn; youth who suffer from depression and anxiety; adults who are treating their mental illness after years of homelessness; and older adults with disabilities who live out their final years with dignity in a Spurwink homes. These are the stories and faces behind the numbers that remind us of the critical need to continue to invest.

I would also like to advocate for the inclusion of COLAs in the biennial budget. The COLAs are enshrined in statute as part of Maine's Rate Reform law and part of the state's recent Settlement Agreement with the DOJ on children's behavioral health which requires COLAs for community behavioral health providers. In the face of a workforce shortage, Spurwink struggles to hire and retain enough people to address the significant unmet community need. In this climate, COLAs are indispensable. To our staff, those are real dollars, that pay for car repairs, fund childcare, and buy groceries. To our clients, they make the difference in access to care and sustained services. Maine cannot retreat from its commitment to strengthen and invest in our behavioral health system and COLA's are an essential part of that commitment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and the important work of the Committees.

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