

LD 210 – Testimony of Linda Sanborn, MD – Fund for Healthy Maine

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyers and honorable committee members. My name is Linda Sanborn, and I live in Gorham. I am here today because I support a simple adjustment to Governor Mills' proposed budget to secure the Fund for Healthy Maine (FHM) and its supported programs into the future.

As most of you are well-aware, the FHM was carefully designed to receive Maine's tobacco settlement dollars, invest in helping smokers quit, prevent addiction and other chronic illnesses, promote good health, lower health care costs and give Maine's children and adults the opportunity to live healthy, productive lives.

I have had the privilege of serving two terms on the HHS Committee and three terms on the AFA Committee, as well as serving on a Blue-Ribbon Commission charged with addressing a structural deficit in the FHM that we could see coming. As a retired primary care physician, I feel a deep commitment to fund prevention, early intervention, and treatments.

I commend the Governor and DHHS Commissioner for not cutting any critical public health programs or funding for MaineCare, programs that all have measurable and significant returns on investment along with improved health outcomes.

That said, I am quite concerned about putting public health programs at risk by moving them into the General Fund. By doing this, we separate the purpose of the tobacco settlement dollars from the programs they should be supporting. And for anyone who has served on your committees as I have, we all understand that when there are budget shortfalls, public health programs are at high risk of being cut, even though they save the state money and save lives in the long run.

The simple tweak to the budget proposal in front of you is that you move a percentage of the overall tobacco excise tax revenue into the FHM each year, rather than moving prevention programs out of the FHM to the GF. The budget will remain balanced, no programs will be cut, and Maine's investment in prevention will position us to be strong and responsive to future health concerns. This move will cost nothing and better aligns the funding with the programs it supports.

Not coincidentally, this was a bipartisan recommendation of Blue-Ribbon Commission – all the legislators on that Commission agreed that a portion of revenue raised from increasing the excise tax on tobacco and vaping products should be directed to close the structural deficit in the FHM.

Separately but related, I also have great appreciation of the Governor for increasing the excise tax on all tobacco products. This is a long overdue measure that will reduce tobacco use and improve public health at the same time as it raises revenue for many of the important health-improving efforts in our state budget that reflect our values as Maine people.

We should all be proud of the FHM legacy in our beloved state – we remain one of the few states that still use tobacco settlement dollars for prevention and treatment of tobacco related illnesses. Let us keep the legacy going!

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions.

Testimony on LD 210 – Linda Sanborn- Proposed GA Budget Cuts

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyers and honorable members of the AFA and HHS Committees, my name is Linda Sanborn, and I live in Gorham.

I am here to plead with you to not cut GA availability for eligible people to 3 months out of twelve, as the Governor has proposed in her biennial budget. This proposal is cruel and harmful in so many ways.

I would like to share with you what the First Parish Congregational Church of Gorham has been doing to help address homelessness. This is a church I have been proud to be a member of over the past 40 years. We try to live what we preach, including honoring the concept that we are our brothers (and sisters!) keepers.

Two years ago, our congregation voted to help address homelessness by transforming the second floor of a three-story addition to our church to provide transitional housing for asylum seekers. We applied for and received a grant from Maine Housing to do just that and completed the work about nine months later.

We provide temporary housing for four families, not to exceed sixteen residents at any one time. We have four sleeping/family rooms, a shower room with three stalls, two large bathrooms shared by two families each, and a kitchen/common room that has two stoves, two refrigerators, two panty cabinets, a washer and dryer, large dining table, couch, and TV.

We have been at full capacity housing four families ever since we opened. We enroll children in Gorham schools (or they can complete the school year in the school system in which they began, to be less disruptive of their learning). In 2024 we had sixteen families, thirty-two adults and forty children, pass into more permanent housing as it became available in other southern Maine towns, including Sanford, Lewiston, and Westbrook.

Many individuals in the community have taken part in supporting these families. Our families are vetted through Greater Portland Family Promise and are here legally. We pay for social workers to work with the families and help them get the services they need. We pick up and deliver food from food pantries, take children to school, appointments, and parent/teacher conferences as needed, and then send them off with essentials such as bedding, pots and pans, and car seats when they find more permanent residence.

We work with Gorham Adult Ed to evaluate the level of English of our residents. Volunteer ESL teachers come to help our residents improve their English while they are waiting the minimum six months before they are allowed to apply for work. And to be clear, the

children are eager to learn, and the adults are eager for the opportunity to work, support themselves, and contribute back to the community.

When I picture what will happen if you cut GA off at 3 months, I picture Leonora, the mother of a one and half year-old son and two young grade schoolers. Leonora is waiting for her husband, who has a valid Visa to come and join the family, something now unlikely to happen under the current Republican administration. I recently saw Leonora with her young son tied around her back making dinner for her family in the kitchen as her two youngsters colored at the dining table. I ask you, where is Leonora going to go when you cut off her GA which pays her rent? Shall we turn her and her young family out in the snow? She cannot work, access childcare, or transport her kids to school. She will not be able to get housing elsewhere because her 3 months of GA will be up soon.

I picture Joanna, a bright, talkative second grader that I transported with her mother to parent/teacher conferences. Joanna came out with a drawing she had made illustrating the water cycle, with big words like evaporation and condensation that she proudly explained to me. Joanna has a ton of potential. What happens to Joanna when she and her mom have no place to live?

These people are human beings, not widgets, not budget lines, not useless things you can throw out to balance a budget. They have basic needs just like you and me. These young families have the potential to help our economy grow, not to destroy it. They have no safe homes to go back to and they will not be able to move to permanent housing without GA helping them for more than 3 months.

Cutting GA, a last resort to keep people housed, is a cruel proposal. My Gorham church and community are trying to do what we can to help, but our residents need the support of GA until they can get on their feet. You must find a better way. Maine can and must do better!

Thank you!