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*Testimony of Representative Ambureen Rana presenting*

## **LD 703, An Act to Establish a Health Care Gap Year Program for Recent College Graduates**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor*

Good morning, Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor. My name is Ambureen Rana, and I represent House District 21, which includes a portion of Bangor. I am here before you today to introduce **LD 703, An Act to Establish a Health Care Gap Year Program for Recent College Graduates**.

Thank you as well to my colleague, Representative Skold – a member of the committee – for his co-sponsorship and support of this bill.

As I know you are all too well aware, Maine is suffering from a severe crisis in access to health care services. At the grocery store and in town halls, we have all heard the shocking stories and disturbing accounts of our constituents who are finding it exceedingly difficult – impossible even – to get access to a broad range of health care providers: from primary care doctors to mental health counselors to specialists.

Mainers are having to wait weeks and months on end – unacceptably far too long – to see a front-end health care provider. And in the meantime, they are suffering in pain or with untreated conditions, delaying care, and having their long-term health put at unconscionable risk.

At the same time, the state's health care workforce – including the number of primary care doctors, nurse practitioners, psychiatrists, and physician assistants – shrank during the pandemic. This has left fewer providers available to keep up with exploding demand and has led to providers seeing an increasing number of sicker patients. Of those who remain, a majority say they feel burned out.

Unfortunately, the significant shortage of frontline providers is only projected to get worse in the years ahead. And this crisis is particularly acute in many of our rural and underserved

communities. In fact, 13 of Maine's 16 counties are considered health professional shortage areas – where there are 3,500 or more patients for every one provider.

To help address the pervasive crisis Mainers are facing in gaining timely access to care, I have introduced LD 703. This bill would establish a health care gap year program for recent college graduates.

The idea is that recent graduates of Maine colleges and universities – institutions like Husson, the University of Maine, and UNE, as well as those from outside the state who are interested in relocating to Maine – would be paired up and placed into frontline vacant positions with Maine health care provider partners, particularly in rural communities and underserved areas of the state.

The program is called a 'gap year' because many of the recent graduates who participate in the program are considering getting advanced degrees or further specialized training, but they have first pledged to spend at least one year (and hopefully more) getting hands-on experience in their field.

Among the most common vacancies being filled by gap year program participants are medical assistant, dental assistant, certified nursing assistant, and technician roles. Placing recent college grads in these frontline positions will not only reduce the current backlog in timely access to care, but it will also help develop the talent pipeline of specialized health care providers that are sorely needed to meet the state's future health workforce needs.

I have filed LD 703 in partnership with The Roux Institute at Northeastern University, which has been a tremendously important recent addition to Maine. Their mission, in part, is to help drive economic development and economic growth in Maine.

Roux has operated a pilot version of the gap year program over the last two years with considerable initial success. The program, which began with a grant from the Maine Department of Labor, includes an impressive network of partner health care providers located throughout the state, including Maine Health, Northern Light Health, Knox Clinic, and St. Mary's Health System just to name a few.

I am delighted that representatives of the Roux and several provider partners are joining us here this morning to testify in support of LD 703. I will let them provide you with more specifics about how the program works and the impressive outcomes it has achieved to date. I have been encouraged by the many ways it is already making a difference and feel strongly that we need to help it reach more communities in need of support across the state.

Importantly, LD 703 would provide modest funding to expand this very worthy public-private partnership over the next two years. These funds are key to unlocking additional philanthropic support that will be critical to sustain the program going forward.

Of course, I am – as we all are – keenly aware of the challenging fiscal environment we presently face, particularly in light of rising costs to maintain services in our safety net health care programs and the uncertainty resulting from the looming threat of federal funding reductions coming out of Washington.

At the same time, I believe we cannot afford to let the growing crisis in access to care for Mainers continue to go unaddressed. In addition, while the requested funding for the gap year program in LD 703 is modest, the return on investment – which importantly includes a shot-in-the-arm of economic activity for rural communities that desperately need it – will be significant.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have and I respectfully request that the committee report LD 703 favorably.

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