

**The Joint Standing Committee on Labor  
Testimony from Jesse Billingham**

**In Support Of**

**LD 703**

**An Act to Establish a Health Care Gap Year Program for Recent College Graduates**

**March 12, 2025**

Chair Roeder, Chair Tipping, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning in favor of LD 703, to establish a Health Care Gap Year Program for Recent College Graduates. Thank you to Representative Rana for sponsoring the bill and to Representative Skold for co-sponsoring. My name is Jesse Billingham, Program Manager of the Roux Institute's Gap Year program.

In her testimony, Representative Rana highlighted the healthcare workforce challenges facing Maine, and the need for new strategies to help fill critical vacancies in entry-level patient facing roles across the state. Without people to work in these front-line positions, patients across the state are not able to access the care they need and deserve.

Over the past two years, the Roux Institute has successfully piloted a program aimed at addressing this challenge. The program focuses on three things: First, it serves as a recruiting tool on behalf of our healthcare partners, reaching recent or soon-to-be college graduates who may not have considered working at one of them, or even in Maine. This both keeps some of our best and brightest college graduates in the state and also brings in new talent from outside of Maine, which we desperately need given our status as the state with oldest population in the nation.

Second, the Gap Year program provides applicants a direct connection to employment opportunities as they approach graduation, opportunities they may not have been considered for because of their limited experience or because they had not yet received their degree.

Finally, the program provides participants resources that they have told us were essential to their decision to accept these entry-level direct care positions, which typically pay less than comparable positions in urban centers like Boston. This includes providing a modest monthly housing stipend to each participant, and access to the Roux Institute in Portland, and many resources that are part of the larger Northeastern global campus network. The vast majority of funds proposed in this bill would go directly to providing these housing stipends.

The structure of the program requires applicants to have a bachelor's degree in any field and to commit to working for a minimum of 12-months in a full-time capacity. Participants are hired into roles that provide on-the-job training, including Medical Assistant, Dental Assistant, Phlebotomist, and Certified Nursing Assistant, among others. The training provided by our healthcare partners is an enormous value to the participants and is key to attracting dedicated, talented applicants who are looking to gain real world

patient care experience before going on to pursue advanced degrees in medicine, nursing, dentistry, and other health professions that Maine critically needs.

In the initial two-year pilot phase that was supported with funding from the Maine Department of Labor, 51 participants were placed across seven healthcare partners, from Portland to Bangor, Rockland to Blue Hill. Rather than leaving the state, the program allowed 38 recent graduates to remain in Maine after college. It has also attracted participants from away who are interested in new experiences and working in a more rural environment. While 55% of participants listed Maine as their primary state of residency, participants have come from 15 different states.

Over the course of the year, participants are exposed to different healthcare fields, which helps them develop a path to a future career. Most importantly, participants are exposed to the state of Maine. Our long-term hope is that through this positive experience early in their careers, participants in the Gap Year program will look to Maine when they apply to graduate school, get placed for residency, or are seeking employment when they become a certified health care provider.

Data from our first year showed that 80% of survey respondents remained in Maine after their initial 12-month commitment. Many continued in their front-line roles, while others enrolled in graduate programs in healthcare at USM and UNE.

The type of partnership created by LD 703 has the potential to support an additional 75 placements over a two-year period, providing a critical resource for healthcare providers while highlighting Maine as a wonderful place to grow a career in healthcare.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you have.