



**Testimony of Bill Jenks on Behalf of
the Maine Council on Aging to the
Committee on Health and Human Services**

**In Favor of
LD 709 An Act to Establish the Respite for ME Program
&
LD815 An Act to Provide Funding for Respite Care and
Supplemental Services Provided by the Family
Caregiver Support Program**

Delivered In-Person March 14, 2025

Greetings, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and the Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Bill Jenks. I am a Board Member of the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA). The MCOA is a broad, multidisciplinary network of over 140 organizations, businesses, municipalities, and older community members working to ensure we can all live healthy, engaged, and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age at home and in community settings. I am testifying in favor of LD 709 and 815 Respite for ME program.

Prior to joining the MCOA board, I was for over 23 years the President and CEO of Home Instead, an organization that provides quality home care services to older people in southern Maine. I also served for many years as Chair of the Board of Directors of the Alzheimer's Association Maine Chapter. I offer this experience because I have heard and witnessed thousands of caregiving stories over the years. I know firsthand how expensive care is and how important access to respite care is for families who are struggling to meet the care needs of loved ones.

There are an estimated 166,000 informal family caregivers in Maine. These are spouses, children, grandchildren, and relatives caring for older people and adults with disabilities who have difficulty engaging in everyday activities without help. About 51,000 of these caregivers are caring for people in Maine who are living with Alzheimer's disease. They provide this care out of the goodness of their hearts, often without compensation and even more often at great cost to themselves, physically, emotionally, and financially.

The 2021 Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan established the Respite for ME grants pilot program. The program was created to provide support for caregivers who might not be eligible for the existing respite programs but who faced the burdens and financial strain of caregiving every day. The grants were used to cover costs related to respite care (including overnight stays and adult day services), assistive technology, self-care services, chore services, home modifications/repairs, and consumable supplies. The program was administered locally by Maine's five Areas Agencies on Aging (AAAs). The pilot project included an extensive evaluation conducted by the Catherine Cutler Institute, Muskie School of Public Service of the University of Southern Maine.

Highlights of the evaluation show a program that met or exceeded goals and provided a significant benefit to the caregivers who are the foundation of the caregiving system:

- The Respite for ME Grants pilot reached caregivers who had high levels of burden and experienced financial strain of caregiving.
- Respite for ME Grants was often the only program available to enrolled caregivers. However, 14% of enrollees chose the program because of the flexibility in what funds could be used for.
- The largest improvements were in decreased proportions of caregivers saying that caregiving impacted their ability to work.
- Caregiver feedback showed that Respite for ME Grants meaningfully impacted their physical, mental, and emotional well-being and made them feel valued.

While the evaluation captures the numbers, what is most exciting is the enthusiasm that surrounded the presentation of these two pieces of legislation. You will hear stories today from caregivers and families who have benefitted from Respite for ME directly.

LD 709 permanently creates the Respite for ME program, and LD 814 provides funding for the program. The two bills together create a significant support mechanism for caregivers in Maine. While this funding request comes during tight fiscal times, this is an investment that pays large dividends. This informal care saves the State more than \$2 billion in formal care costs, keeping people at home, reducing hospital utilization and delaying entry into more expensive care. The Respite for ME Program allows working family caregivers the opportunity to continue to work, thus avoiding negative economic impacts on them personally, and the economy.

No program can have this kind of success without structure. Maine's five AAAs have provided the structure for this program and are willing to continue to implement it. However, it is critical that administrative funding be specifically included in any appropriation for this program.

MCOA urges you to adopt both pieces of legislation.

Thank you, and I'm happy to answer questions.