

Good morning, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and the members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Becky Hadiaris and I am testifying in favor of LD 709, which permanently establishes the Respite for ME program, and LD 815, which funds it. I am the Family Caregiver Program Director at Southern Maine Agency on Aging. For the past 20 years, I have dedicated my career to supporting older adults and caregivers, but my appreciation for caregivers began in childhood as I watched my parents care for my grandmother in our home. I saw firsthand the emotional, physical, and financial toll it takes. I also saw the deep love and commitment that caregivers bring to this role, often at great personal sacrifice.

When I was hired at SMAA in 2022 to manage the Respite for ME program, I knew it had the potential to change lives—but I was not prepared for just how profound its impact would be.

Every day at SMAA, we receive calls from caregivers who are overwhelmed and don't know where to turn.

Many of these are caregivers who:

- Don't have a village to support them
- Are struggling with their own health issues
- Skip their own doctor's appointments because they have no one to watch their loved one
- Face missed workdays and financial hardships
- Feel exhausted and isolated
- Begin to lose their sense of self
- Have 2-3 x higher levels of depression than non-caregivers

When Respite for ME was available, it gave me and my colleagues, a real, tangible resource to offer caregivers in need. We saw the relief on their faces when we explained there was support available. We heard the gratitude they expressed knowing that their loved ones would be kept safe while they attended to long overdue responsibilities. We noted the positive changes in their mood, appearance, and energy levels after they received even small gestures of support.

This program worked. It allowed caregivers to continue caring—not just for their loved ones, but for themselves as well. And its absence has left a gap that we have no other means to fill.

Maine is already facing a critical shortage of care professionals and facilities.

Without the 166,000 family caregivers providing care, our already stressed system would crumble. They are the backbone of long-term care, providing unpaid support that keeps their loved ones at home and out of institutions. But they cannot do it alone and they shouldn't have to. So today, I urge you to consider making Respite for ME a permanent program—not just as a policy decision, but as a commitment to the thousands of caregivers across Maine who are doing one of the hardest jobs imaginable.

Thank you.