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Testimony of Rep. Kristen Cloutier presenting

LD 815, An Act to Provide Funding for Respite Care and Supplemental Services Provided by the Family Caregiver Support Program *Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Kristen Cloutier, and I represent House District 94, which includes part of my hometown of Lewiston. I am pleased to sponsor **LD 815, An Act to Provide Funding for Respite Care and Supplemental Services Provided by the Family Caregiver Support Program**.

The Respite for ME pilot program, created in the 130th Legislature and funded through Governor Janet Mills' Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan, utilized \$5.1 million in American Rescue Plan funds and began enrolling caregivers in October 2022. This two-year grant program offered up to \$5,171 to those providing care to loved ones at home. Beyond funding temporary caregivers, these resources supported counseling, training, financial guidance, and assistive technology.

And while this pilot program offered a vital respite for families, it came to an end in September.

Because of its overwhelming success, the Department has submitted a bill to make the Respite for ME program permanent. However, this Department's bill does not provide funding to support the program, which is why I have submitted this parallel bill - LD 815, which provides ongoing funding to the Office of Aging and Disability Services within the Department of Health and Human Services for respite care and supplemental services for family caregivers and older relative caregivers.

As some of you know, I was a family caregiver for my mom until she passed away in 2018 from Alzheimer's Disease. It was not long after her initial diagnosis that we moved her from her home in Ocala, Florida back to Maine. At the time, her illness did not require her to be in a locked memory care facility, but it did require her to have access to round-the-clock care.

This care ended up falling partly to my husband and me, who both needed to work full-time to keep our household and family afloat financially. Mom went to "adult daycare" in Topsham while we were at work, and we split the duties of taking care of her in the evenings and on weekends,

juggling schedules to support our then 10-year-old daughter and community responsibilities as well.

I was blessed to have had this time with my mother and I would not change our decision to take her into our home. But my time as a family caregiver was one of the most challenging times in my life, as I was constantly navigating family, medical, housing and financial details, all while providing the basic care my mother needed. As my mother's health began to decline, so did my capacity for self care, as well as the quality of my relationships with her and others.

My story is not unique. Nearly one in eight Mainers care for a family member who is older or has a disability. In 2023, it was estimated that family members in Maine provided 155 million hours of unpaid care, worth \$2.9 billion annually. Dementia caregivers make up a substantial portion of these totals, representing 87 million hours of unpaid care, worth \$1.9 billion annually.

The impact of Respite for ME over the past two years has been remarkable. After just the first year, we saw a significant reduction in high stress and depression scores as well as financial strain among caregivers.

But these aren't just statistics – they represent real Maine families finding relief. Funding Respite for ME means extending this crucial support to more caregivers across our state.

I know personally what family caregivers sacrifice to provide care for their loved ones, especially those impacted by Alzheimer's Disease. Respite for ME has helped to preserve the dignity of those needing care by enabling them to stay home with family, while also supporting the caregivers' well-being. These dedicated family members deserve the recognition, support, and resources to continue filling the gaps in Maine's currently unmet need for care.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.