

Testimony of Christopher Bates-Withers, MMS, PA-C, CAQ-HM, CAQ-CVTS

In support of LD 1166 "An Act to Change the Professional Title and Identification of Physician Assistants to Physician Associates".

Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, and members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee, my name is Christopher Bates-Withers. I am a Westbrook resident, and I practice medicine as a PA in Islesboro, Maine as well as serving as assistant program director for Maine's only PA program. Today, I am testifying in support of LD 1166 "An Act to Change the Professional Title and Identification of Physician Assistants to Physician Associates".

As a medical practitioner, I am strongly committed to transparent communication to patients and to the public about my training, my role, and the services that I am able to provide. In 2021, our national PA organization officially changed the title of our profession from Physician Assistant to Physician Associate, to more accurately reflect the work that is done by our profession. Our profession has developed rigorous and constantly evolving standards of education, with a growing sector of new graduates completing postgraduate fellowships in clinical specialties. PAs practice in nearly every medical specialty, in both the inpatient and outpatient environment. While we strongly value our relationship with our physician colleagues, the work that we do is definitively collaborative rather than assistive in nature.

The more than 1000 PAs currently practicing in Maine constitute a vital portion of our state's healthcare workforce, in many cases making medical care available to rural communities that are underserved or unserved by physicians. Many PAs in Maine manage their own panel of primary care patients, who are generally not even seen by a physician during a clinic visit.

We do not have any practicing physicians who reside on Islesboro Island, where I currently practice medicine. As an island, our community is geographically isolated and our patients are dependent upon a ferry that only runs during daytime hours to get to mainland hospitals. Without my PA and NP colleagues, our community would be without medical services and without access to lifesaving emergency care after hours. While we have a collaborating physician available for consultation, the work that we do is direct patient management rather than assisting of another practitioner.

While knowledge about the PA profession has gradually grown in the general public, it is still common to encounter patients who are confused by our current title and do not understand our role as medical practitioners. Changing the title of our profession from Physician Assistant to Physician Associate will not change our scope of practice, or any of our existing requirements for training, licensure, and credentialing. However, this title change will more accurately communicate to patients and to the public the nature of our work, and will provide better clarity by aligning the verbiage in Maine's statutes with that of our national

organization. Importantly, changing our title to Physician Associate more clearly differentiates us to patients from medical assistants who may work with us in the same practice, but with distinctly different responsibilities.

The title Physician Associate accurately defines the current role of our profession in the healthcare workforce, both locally and nationally. A modernized title allows our patients to see us as highly-trained, respected and capable healthcare practitioners who they can trust, rather than mere assistants to another provider. We remain committed to providing competent, compassionate and collaborative treatment that our patients can rely upon from the Physician Associate providing their care.