Testimony in Support of LD 1204:
An Act to Support Direct Access Worker Employment by Removing Certain Employment Disqualifications

April 15, 2025

Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services,

My name is Tess Parks. I am the Policy Director of the Maine Recovery Action Project (ME-RAP), a grassroots network of Mainers working on community and public policy based solutions to substance use. I recently served as a member of the Criminal Records Review Committee (CRRC), representing the recovery community. I am here testifying in support of LD 1204 on behalf of our statewide team of organizers.

First, I want to thank Senator Talbot Ross for her leadership in bringing forward this critical legislation and for opening the dialogue around the Matrix for Disqualifying Crimes for direct access workers. ME-RAP's work is grounded in a "listening first" approach that centers the voices of those most directly impacted by the policies we seek to reform.

Last summer, we held 33 listening sessions across every county in Maine, engaging over 650 people—many in recovery or with justice system involvement. A common concern was "the Matrix", which automatically disqualifies individuals with certain convictions from direct care jobs for a period of time. This creates major barriers for those in sustained recovery who are ready to contribute through meaningful work. While protecting direct care recipients is essential, the Matrix does not take into account rehabilitation, growth, and lived experience—traits that are especially valuable in substance use treatment settings. The existing waiver process is complex and employer-dependent, often leading to missed opportunities to hire uniquely qualified candidates. A copy of the Matrix is attached to this testimony.

This problem is not occurring in a vacuum. According to data from the Maine Department of Labor's Center for Workforce Research and Information, **home health and personal care aides are the second-highest occupation in terms of annual job openings in Maine**[1]. The need for a strong, reliable, and compassionate direct care workforce has never been more urgent.

During my time on the CRRC, I introduced a recommendation for legislation to reduce the number of crimes that result in automatic disqualification from employment as a direct access worker. After thoughtful discussion, a majority of the Committee supported my proposal to remove three specific crimes from the Matrix: aggravated cultivation of marijuana, refusing to

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submit to arrest or detention, and eluding or passing a roadblock. As noted in the Committee's Final Report: "...a majority of the committee members who voted believe that there are far too many offenses on the automatic disqualification list, which may be exacerbating the severe shortage of direct access workers across the State[2]."

LD 1204 is a step in the right direction. We urge this Committee to not only support LD 1204 but also to continue examining ways the Matrix can be reformed to better align with our state's workforce needs.

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

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[2] https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/11277