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Testimony of Rep. Kristen Cloutier in opposition to
LDs: 406, 539, 952, 1169, 1221, 1249, 1273, 1307, 1333, 1400, and 1712
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor

Good afternoon, Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and honorable members of the Labor Committee. My name is Kristen Cloutier, and I represent House District 94, which includes part of my hometown of Lewiston. I am here today to testify **in strong opposition to the 11 bills listed above that aim to modify Maine's Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) program.**

These proposals – which range from substantial technical and administrative changes to a full-on repeal of the program – disregard the years of hard work that the Legislature put into crafting a PFML program uniquely tailored to Maine people, families and businesses. And although each one attacks it from a different angle, they all share a similar goal: to destroy or weaken the program and make it harder for Maine workers to access paid leave.

The current law wasn't established overnight. In the 130th Legislature, I had the opportunity to serve as the House Chair of the Commission to Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program – a group of bipartisan lawmakers, policy experts and representatives from large and small businesses.

For two years, we spent countless hours working to determine the best way to implement an equitable and inclusive PFML policy here in Maine. We received input from Maine businesses and workers. We studied existing programs in other states to help determine what solution would fit best here. And we considered various funding sources and structures before providing recommendations for the next Legislature to consider. But the commission's work was just the beginning.

In the 131st Legislature, as the lead House sponsor of the bill that created the program, I had the opportunity to meet with hundreds of local Maine businesses and organizations to listen to their concerns and hear their feedback, from Downeast Maine all the way up to Aroostook County. We met with members of the State Chamber and regional Chambers of Commerce, as well as groups representing the interests of older Mainers, women, foster care parents and children, teachers, early childhood educators, health care providers, local governments and more. That unique process was

unique to that bill and unlike any piece of legislation that I have ever worked on or witnessed – and one that I was so proud to help lead.

After the law creating the program was signed in 2023, making Maine the 13th state to establish a statewide PFML program, the Department of Labor initiated a thoughtful rulemaking process with careful attention to detail. It included additional public engagement and feedback from Maine employers and employees – including multiple public listening sessions – to help continue to craft the strongest program possible to better meet the needs of all Mainers. The final rules were published in December 2024, and payroll withholdings began on Jan. 1 of this year. Mainers will be able to begin accessing the benefit next May.

I believe all of this context is important to demonstrate the legwork that was put into crafting a program that is both comprehensive and extraordinarily complex. Even amending one, seemingly minor aspect of the law, can carry significant ramifications that impact the administration of the program, jeopardize its solvency, and make it inaccessible to the people who need it most.

While I can confidently say that the process that has led us to this point was exhaustive, I also acknowledge that the program is not perfect and there are amendments necessary in order for the program to function in the way it was intended. LD 894, sponsored by Senate President Daughtry, aims to make those fixes. It is the only bill before this committee today that is supported by the Department, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

Maine's PFML program was built by Mainers, for Mainers. It wasn't created to satisfy the interests of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, or other lobbyists looking to amend or abolish the program. It was created for everyday Maine workers and families, many of whom have consistently spoken loudly and clearly about their support for PFML. Many of whom will be providing testimony before you today in support of the current program.

A recent nonpartisan poll from Pan-Atlantic Research indicated that 70% of likely Maine voters support the creation of the program – including more than 50% of Republicans. This broad support extends across demographics like age, gender and income level. And it's no surprise why.

Regardless of what age group you're in or what part of the state you live in, everyone knows someone who has needed to take time away from work to care for themselves or a loved one in need at some point in their lives. No one should have to choose between caring for their family and losing their job. As written, the current PFML law ensures that no Mainer ever has to make this impossible decision again – it will provide a lifeline to workers when they need it the most.

Let's give the program the time it deserves to succeed instead of making reckless, sweeping changes before Mainers have even begun to experience the benefits.

With all of this in mind, I implore the committee to reject these bills.

Thank you for your time and consideration.