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Testimony of Representative Laurie Osher presenting

LD 999, An Act to Include Employees of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission in State's Group Health Plan

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services

Good afternoon, Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services. I am Laurie Osher, and I represent House District 25 in Orono, which is located in the homeland of the Penobscot Nation. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 999, An Act to Include Employees of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission in State's Group Health Plan**.

This is a common sense, impactful bill that would make employees of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission eligible to participate in the State of Maine's employee group health plan. As you may know, Title 5, Section 285 of the Maine Revised Statutes outlines the groups of individuals eligible to access health insurance under the State of Maine's employee group health plan, and it has previously been amended to extend coverage to employees of quasi-governmental entities and other groups, ranging from the Maine State Employees Association to the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority.

As an independent intergovernmental agency created by state law - namely, the "Act to Implement the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act" - in 1980, the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission - known as MITSC - is a commonsense addition to the list. For those of you who are not familiar with MITSC, it is composed of 13 members, six of whom are appointed by the Governor of the State of Maine. The Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Passamaquoddy Tribe and the Penobscot Nation each appoint two members, and the final member - who serves as the commission chair - is selected by the other twelve commissioners.

Under the statute, MITSC is responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of the Implementing Act, as well as the relationship between the State of Maine and the Tribes, and to make reports and recommendations to the Legislature. The Legislature has also identified other specific duties in law that MITSC fulfills, all of which are intended to further the goal of effective working relationships between the State of Maine and the Tribes.

Given the breadth of these responsibilities, MITSC currently employs two staff members. With such a small staff, providing employee health coverage presents an outsize financial challenge to the commission. By comparison, the state employee plan offers much better coverage at a relatively modest cost.

By extending the state employee group health plan to these employees, LD 999 recognizes both the importance of their work and the responsibility which we, the Legislature, have asked MITSC to assume. I respectfully urge the committee to support the bill and ensure that employees of MITSC have equitable access to the same benefits that are available to employees of other organizations created by the Legislature.

I understand from conversations with the chairs that the committee has asked the Department of Administrative and Financial Services to develop criteria to help the committee evaluate proposals like LD 999. I look forward to reviewing the criteria when it is available and to working with the committee to advance this measure.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions and know MITSC Commissioners are also available to provide you with additional information.