



Maine Equal Justice

People Policy Solutions

MEJ Testimony *in support of* LD 1615, An Act to Expand Access to Oral Health Care by Creating a New Path for Obtaining a License to Practice Dentistry

April 30, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, and members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Advocacy and Programs Director for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. Our organization has decades of experience working with people with low incomes to support access to health care, food security, housing security, education and training programs, and other programs that support individuals and families in moving toward financial security so they can thrive. I'm testifying in support of LD 1615.

Dental care is health care. It's essential for our physical health, mental health, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing. MEJ has worked on improving access to oral health care for Mainers with low incomes for decades. In recent years, we worked with a range of stakeholders – MaineCare members, health care providers, and other advocates for improved access to care – to help pass a bill that created a comprehensive adult dental benefit in the MaineCare program. That bill received unanimous support in the legislature and the benefit was implemented in July 2022 along with improvements to the existing dental benefit for children. Access to oral health care due to that law has been life changing for thousands of people across our state.

There's also a financial cost to us all when oral health needs go unmet. Issues that could be easily prevented or resolved become more serious. This results in more visits to the emergency room and more expensive care being needed. For children struggling with oral health pain, their nutrition can be negatively affected and they can have poorer educational outcomes. Adults with dental pain or tooth loss can also face nutritional deficits, poorer productivity at work, and it can even affect success with recovery for those with substance use challenges.

Unfortunately, coverage alone does not make access for everyone possible. The number one issue we hear when people need dental care is that they cannot find a provider taking new patients or the wait to get into a provider is more than a year. This issue affects those with coverage through MaineCare the most, but it is also a real challenge for people with private coverage or no coverage at all. Every week MEJ hears from clients, people in our network, or organizational partners about someone struggling to get the care they need.

I've had the honor of working with many oral health providers and experts over the past six years and have learned a lot about the state of our oral health workforce. There are many smart and dedicated people trying to advance solutions that will change the landscape of care for the better so every Mainer – no matter the type of health care coverage they have – can access this essential health care. This is one of those solutions. We have to be open to looking at new ways of doing things if we really want to address access. That can mean incentives for people to train

as dentists, hygienists, dental assistants, and specialists. It can mean creatively bringing providers to schools or other places where people in need of care are routinely already going. It can also mean looking at people with expertise who have traveled a different path to get here – like this bill does.

As you've heard, LD 1615 seeks an alternative path for providers who have foreign training by creating the adjunct dentist license. We desperately need more providers. There are people in our communities who want to use their skills to provide oral health care. We must move beyond the ways we've always done things and be open to having people with expertise who have different backgrounds be able to practice.

These individuals would have supervision from a dentist for their first three years. They can only move into being a licensed dentist after three consecutive years with an adjunct dental license in good standing. This puts protections in place to ensure patients receive quality care.

Right now Maine is missing out on foreign-trained providers who are practicing in states more willing to explore alternative paths. We simply can't afford to maintain the status quo. It's harming the health of people in every community in Maine and it is negatively impacting our workforce across many industries. We need to be willing to forge a new path to start to improve access to oral health care. LD 1615 provides just such a path.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to pass LD 1615. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions.

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