



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1400
MAINE RELAY 711

Karen L. Montell

57 Dresden Avenue
Gardiner, ME 04345
Karen.Montell@legislature.maine.gov

Testimony of Representative Karen Montell in support of
**LD 1688, An Act to Encourage Continuing Education on Infection-Associated
Chronic Conditions for Physicians and Nurses**

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

April 30, 2025

Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson and distinguished members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee, I am Karen Montell and I represent House District 54, which includes the Town of Farmingdale and the City of Gardiner. I am here to testify in support of **LD 1688, An Act to Encourage Continuing Education on Infection-Associated Chronic Conditions for Physicians and Nurses**.

I happened to stumble across this bill last Friday after a constituent of mine sent me a schedule of upcoming events. When I opened the link, somehow Representative Rana's bill popped up. When I saw the bill title, it resonated with me. I have been dealing with chronic health conditions for more than forty years. I had never really thought of my health in this way, and yet on this very same day, I had received my recent lab results for blood work taken just two days before. These lab results would once again confirm the Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) was raging a war inside of me, as well as a continued low white blood cell (WBC) count, which takes me back to where my journey began more than forty years ago.

Before I begin my story, I just want to say that this is solely my story – my recall – and I am not here to discount any medical practitioner, doctors, nurses, labs, etc. I do believe however that we can all benefit from the continuing education referred to in this bill. I also want to say that I have never shared my story, and to be sharing it in this format is not only daunting, but difficult. Many of you here today are, in theory, strangers to me and some will hear my story as part of the permanent public record, yet they don't know me at all and we may never meet. However, it is so important that we share our stories and have this conversation.

When I was a young teenager, I was active as a gymnast and a cheerleader, and liked climbing trees. As I got into high school, I started having regular sore throats and swollen glands and general malaise – I just felt crappy a lot. My doctor at the time told me I was allergic to everything – pollen, fragrance dust, etc. I would routinely get a prescription for amoxicillin and, for a time, I would feel better and be back in school until the cycle would continue all over again. I am not sure when things changed, but before I knew it, I was having blood work every other week because my lab work results indicated a low WBC count. I was diagnosed with Neutropenia and Leukopenia. If you look up Neutropenia, you will be taken to the American Cancer Society page because usually those who are diagnosed have suffered from a cancer or could face a diagnosis from an underlying infection. Additionally, Leukopenia in plain terms

means the patient is immunocompromised. For me, it has meant a lifetime of not knowing how I will feel when I wake up in the morning.

I have also been told over the years that I am nervous and anxious, and that perhaps I was suffering from depression. I continued to have severe fatigue and seek regular medical attention, returned to regular chiropractic visits, started seeing a health coach, started juicing, sought treatment from an acupuncturist, resumed my regular fitness routine and read as much as I could about how to obtain proper health. I have always been fortunate to have maintained a healthy weight, active lifestyle and had access to proper nutrition. However, it appears there is more that we can learn about chronic health conditions and how best to navigate them. More than a decade ago, I started seeing a naturopathic doctor and have appreciated the holistic approach to health and how it has allowed me to take a much larger role in my own healthcare. As a result, I was diagnosed with adrenal fatigue, which is often mistaken for depression and can create a constant “fight or flight” mode dealing with chronic stress and low cortisol levels. There are days when I am just too fatigued to function. Making personal health a priority is just not something supported by society in general. There are constant stressors put upon us as a part of our society of pushing forward to advance oneself in life, regardless of the toll on human health.

After the last legislative session, my blood work revealed that I was severely depleted and I spent much of the summer getting vitamin injections, resting, and working out and yet, I was still exhausted. At the beginning of the session when I started to get a burning pain in my spine and realized that it could mean a shingles outbreak, I contacted my doctor, who, along with mega doses of supplements to boost my immunity, prescribed Valacyclovir. There was no way I wanted to deal with a shingles outbreak during the legislative session. When I took the medication I was able to function better than without it. In order to tolerate this medication, I need to drink more than a hundred ounces of water a day, because the downside is kidney damage and headaches.

Every night before I go to bed, I tell myself I will feel better tomorrow. Every morning, I allow myself to take the time I need to take care of myself and remind myself that I will get through the day because I know being positive is so important. However, the reality is my chronic conditions continue to take their toll on my health and well being.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important bill. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.