

**University of Maine System Testimony Regarding
*LD 1891, An Act to Address the Dental Professional Workforce Shortage by
Establishing Scholarship and Loan Programs and Updating the Dental Care Access
Tax Credit* — Presented by UMS Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer
Samantha Warren — May 5, 2025**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: My name is Sam Warren and I am the Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer for the University of Maine System (UMS). We are proud that **through the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA), our System is the state's leading provider of practice-ready allied dental health professionals.**

UMA offers Maine's only Commission on Dental Accreditation-approved dental assisting program as well as expanded function dental assisting (EFDA) and dental hygiene. These high-quality programs are also highly affordable. For example, the tuition cost of UMA's dental hygiene degree program is one-third of the price of the private program offered in the state. As part of their training, UMA allied dental health students receive extensive hands-on clinical experiences, including at on-campus clinics in Bangor and Lewiston where they provide free and low-cost preventative (cleaning, x-rays, and fluoride treatment) and basic restorative (simple fillings) services to more than 2,000 eligible Mainers annually including low-income children, Veterans, and the Maine National Guard. **UMA boasts a 100% job placement rate for its allied dental health graduates – 95% of whom stay in Maine.**

As part of strategic efforts to meet state workforce and community needs, our System is also expanding allied dental health education to Aroostook County for the first time through an exciting partnership between UMA and the University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI). Leveraging one-time Congressionally Directed Spending secured by U.S. Sens. Susan Collins and Angus King, UMPI will construct a dental lab on its Presque Isle campus where UMA will deliver its dental assisting and EFDA programs and community oral healthcare services starting in 2027.

I want to remind you that the 131st Legislature and Governor Mills directed our System to study the feasibility of establishing a dental therapy degree program at UMA (Resolve 2023, ch 56). Dental therapists have a scope of practice that goes beyond that of hygienists to include basic restorations and triage of acute dental trauma. A broad coalition of supporters testified to this Committee that a dental therapy training program in the state would greatly improve access to care and oral health outcomes, similar to how physician's assistants are addressing primary care doctor shortages in Maine and nationally. It would also provide allied dental professionals with opportunities for upward mobility. In an effort to inform your consideration of LD 1891, I want to reinforce the recommendations that UMS made to you

and the Legislature in our November 2024 report-back on that study, which more than 350 oral health professionals participated in. They include:

- **Financial assistance for allied dental health students:** UMA's dental hygiene, dental assisting, and EFDA degree and certificate programs are highly affordable when compared to peers. However, because of the high costs to provide these programs, UMA charges a differential tuition rate, which is a barrier to some students enrolling, persisting through degree completion, and committing to practice in rural regions. The Legislature took an important step in 2023 by expanding eligibility for the FAME-administered Maine Dental Education Loan Program to dental assistants, hygienists, and therapists, as well as EFDAs. However, the amount of loan forgiveness available through that program remains limited and the Legislature should consider additional appropriations or targeted funding for UMA to support allied dental health student scholarships.
- **Capital investment to modernize UMA dental clinic and laboratory spaces:** Our System has \$1.8 billion in deferred maintenance and imminent infrastructure investment need. The size and condition of existing clinical and laboratory spaces limit enrollment in allied dental education, especially at UMA Bangor. Modest investment in these training and service facilities and related equipment would pay dividends.
- **Faculty recruitment and retention:** Because of the ratios required in allied dental education (typically 5:1), any expansion of student enrollment and free/reduced community services depends on recruiting and retaining highly qualified instructors. The Legislature could consider whether a dental faculty loan forgiveness program administered by FAME, as currently exists for nursing faculty, could support faculty recruitment and retention for all dental education programs in the state.

In our report, you will find more detail about these and other recommendations, which we believe would yield the greatest rate of return for Mainers' oral healthcare access and outcomes. Please know our recommendations do not constitute a formal request and our System's priority remains appropriations for UMS at or above the 4% level provided in Governor Mills' original FY26-27 biennial budget proposal and endorsed by a bipartisan majority of this Committee.

Dental hygienists, dental assistants, and EFDAs are the foundation of dental care in our state. These allied dental professionals maximize dentists' ability to serve patients while also providing critical services to patients themselves. Investing in their development is a force multiplier for Maine. I thank you for your ongoing support of the University of Maine System and the University of Maine at Augusta's dental programs and welcome your questions.