



Testimony of the Maine Dental Association
before the Education and Cultural Affairs Services Committee

In SUPPORT of

**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**

Public Hearing: Monday, May 5, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

I am Therese Cahill, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Maine Dental Association. The MDA represents all dentists in Maine and is a statewide association dedicated to promoting oral health, advancing excellence in dentistry, and building a future that empowers Maine's communities with sustainable access to oral healthcare. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Without question, **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**, is perhaps one of the most consequential pieces of legislation dental professionals and their patients, your constituents, will see in this, and future, Legislative Sessions.

We are at a crossroads. While Maine's population has increased approximately 4.3% over the last 5 years, the same does not hold true for new dentists and dental hygienists practicing in our State. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), the number of Maine dentists declined from 590 in 2019 to 530 in 2023, and the number of hygienists fell from 1,040 to 840. The problem gets worse when you consider like the rest of Maine, the dental workforce is aging. In fact, in March 2024, 57% of active licensed dentists were at least 60 years old. This was discussed in an article published in the Portland Press Herald [Access to dental care in Maine reaching a crisis point](#) (May 2024). Last year, Maine had six (6) new dental school graduates (5 from UNE, one from Tufts) apply for dental licenses; conversely, we had over 50 dentists retire. This trend shows no signs of slowing down.

Where this hits most poignantly is outside of southern Maine, which can be seen visually on the Harvard Gazette's January 2025 article showing "dental deserts" (p. 3). Regardless of how a Maine resident is looking to pay for their dental care, finding a new dental home in the 13 counties outside of York, Cumberland, and Sagadahoc is incredibly challenging. Many retiring dentists have struggled to sell their very profitable and busy practices in these already challenged areas; these dentists continue to work longer than planned, as they truly do not

want to close their practices and see their communities to lose access. Occasionally, this is exactly what has happened, further exasperating the already fragile dental provider network.

While we had great hopes that Maine would see an influx of new dentists with the opening of UNE's College of Dental Medicine, that has not come to pass. And both UNE and UMaine offer accredited and exceptional dental hygiene programs. And yet, we are facing a critical shortage of registered dental hygienists as well. In dentistry, while UNE was originally graduating many Maine residents, this is no longer the case. And while the data is difficult to confirm, our analysis shows that there are approximately 15 long-term Maine residents in the second through fourth year classes (172 seats) and only two Maine residents in the first-year group which has 72 seats.

This legislation requests the renewal and expansion of tax credits already in statute. This strategy has been used on and off over the years. We believe it would be a great incentive for dental professionals to look to Maine as a viable option to establish their practice.

This bill also seeks a scholarship program for Maine residents who choose to go to dental school, like the program which exist for medical doctors. For this part of the bill, we'd ask to amend the language to expand the eligible schools to those in New England instead just in the "State", as getting into the **one** school in Maine has proven challenging for Maine residents who have been successful in getting accepted into other schools in New England.

Lastly, this legislation also asks for a different type of student loan repayment program which is solely focused on **where** the provider practices as opposed to tying it to a qualified facility that takes a large portion patients with MaineCare . While clearly serving the MaineCare population is important, we can only serve them if we have qualified professions come and stay in our state. If directed by the Legislature, this change could simply be an expansion of the current Maine Dental Education Loan Repayment Program.

We urge this committee to support the dental professional workforce and make an investment in Maine residents' oral health by supporting LD 1891 with the scholarship amendment. There are **not** enough dental professionals to serve the people of Maine. While we are fully cognizant of the fiscal challenges ahead, we cannot afford to ignore the fact that dentists and dental hygienists, trained here in Maine, are choosing to leave our State. We absolutely must begin to actively recruit and incentivize dentists and dental hygienists.

Thank you for your time and attention.