



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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

Morgan Rielly

16 Blue Spruce Farm Road, Apt #6
Westbrook, ME 04092
Phone: (207) 228-5767
Morgan.Rielly@legislature.maine.gov

May 8, 2025

Testimony of Representative Morgan Rielly presenting

LD 876, An Act to Support Rural Resilience and Emergency Response Through the Maine Service Fellows Program

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development

Good afternoon Senator Curry, Representative Gere and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development. My name is Morgan Rielly, and I represent House District 127, which includes part of Westbrook. I am here today to present **LD 876, An Act to Support Rural Resilience and Emergency Response Through the Maine Service Fellows Program**, which would fully fund the existing Maine Service Fellows (MSF) Program.

Background of MSF:

First, allow me to give a brief history of the development and passage of the program. MSF was born out of a “service think tank” that Volunteer Maine, our state service commission, hosted in the Fall of 2020. The participants represented small municipal offices, nonprofits, school districts, elected officials and businesses from across the state. All those present recognized that Maine needs to expand service programming in our rural communities to address the negative economic impacts they have faced from the COVID-19 pandemic, along with ongoing issues around public health, housing and environmental concerns. Those in attendance identified a gap in our service infrastructure, with many small, rural communities and micro-organizations unable to support traditional service programs like AmeriCorps. Another key issue members focused on was the need to retain younger Mainers here in the state, particularly in rural communities.

Volunteer Maine, stakeholders, and I then drafted and introduced legislation (**LD 1010**) to establish the MSF Program during the first session of the 130th Legislature.

LD 1010, like **LD 876**, was a bipartisan piece of legislation. The bill passed in the State and Local Government Committee, which then had oversight of VolunteerMaine, with bipartisan support before being enacted in the House and Senate. Governor Janet Mills signed **LD 1010** into law in June of 2021.

Volunteer Maine adopted USDA's rural-urban commuting area codes (RUCA) codes to determine where Maine Service Fellows will operate. RUCA codes are used to classify U.S. Census tracts using measures of population density, urbanization and daily commuting.

Currently, the communities that are eligible for the Maine Service Fellows program are in the following counties: Aroostook, Franklin, Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, Waldo and Washington. There are also some towns in Penobscot County that qualify as long as they have populations under 5,000. Eligible sponsors for MSF are public or private non-profits, state/county/local government, education institutions, faith-based organizations, federally recognized tribes and regional organizations that are based within the communities previously mentioned.

The task force determined several areas that Maine Service Fellows will focus on that include the following: housing (including eviction prevention), workforce development, substance use prevention and recovery, public health (including mental health) and ensuring our communities are resilient in the face of climate-related threats. Service Fellows devote full-time work – around 1,800 hours over 12 months – in their respective communities. They commit to two-years of service, are paid a living wage and upon completion of service, receive an educational loan payment that is 2% of the living allowance.

MSF is specifically designed for our small communities and micro-organizations in rural areas, allowing for a quicker implementation of the program on the ground and, therefore, a quicker return on investment. Communities can access Fellows' help more rapidly because the application process and accountability requirements are streamlined. As a state-based service program, a broader set of community needs can be addressed, as opposed to federally-prescribed funding priorities. Our small towns know what they need, and the MSF Program has and will give them the support to take on these issues and build sustainable infrastructure that will continue to operate after Fellows have left these communities.

Where Fellows Are Serving:

MSF has had three Fellows serve in communities with four more planning to start their service this year.

The Fellow that served with the Sipayik Resilience Committee, a community group focused on climate action and resilience serving the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipayik, focused on energy efficiency for homeowners. The Fellow shared with Volunteer Maine that he plans to serve his

District 127: Westbrook

local community as an entrepreneur focusing on energy efficiency and weatherization and has pursued technical training to receive certifications and licensure to conduct energy audits.

The Fellow that is serving in Dover-Foxcroft has worked on advancing local climate action and resiliency efforts. He worked with the Commons Energy Collaborative, the local Climate Action Advisory Committee, and Maine Highlands Window Dressers. He helped Dover-Foxcroft with planning policy for heating and cooling centers, presented to the town select board, recruited volunteers, and hosted workshops on community resilience. He plans on renewing his service in Dover-Foxcroft to continue to work in the community on these important projects.

The Fellow based in Norway has been working with the Center for an Ecology-based Economy to help address regional volunteer capacity and help coordinate community climate groups and municipal resilience committees. Since starting his service, he has planned and facilitated over ten different climate workshops and community engagement events. He will be finishing his service this June.

Currently, there are four towns that are recruiting for Fellows. Cherryfield is recruiting a Fellow to work on river resilience and community engagement. Deer Island and Stonington are recruiting for a Fellow to help with sustainable housing and community development. Machias is recruiting a Fellow to work with them on comprehensive planning and community action. And Van Buren will have a Fellow that will work on addressing food insecurity and helping build community resilience.

Fellows are playing a crucial role in addressing our state's needs to face the housing crisis and ensure our communities are resilient in the face of natural disasters.

Emergency Response Corps:

I have also included in **LD876**, which is separate from MSF, a Volunteer Disaster Response Corps. After speaking with the Maine Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), I'm asking the committee to strike section 3 of the bill. MEMA will be working with DVEM and Volunteer Maine to help recruit more veterans and former national service members to be a part of their local Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT).

Conclusion:

Funding our service programming like MSF costs money, but we have to frame it in terms of return of investment. Service programs in Maine, as seen with Maine's Conservation Corps, typically generate \$3 in return investments for every \$1 that is spent, which stays in the communities service members operate in. AmeriCorps programming has generated roughly \$34 in return investment for every federal dollar spent. Service programming, like MSF, builds up local infrastructure that makes them and partner organizations self-sustaining after Fellows have left.

District 127: Westbrook

This is a fiscally smart investment that will leverage state and federal monies, hopefully attracting philanthropic dollars too, in order to make the strongest possible impact in aiding rural communities that don't have the capacity for traditional AmeriCorps programming, while promoting civic engagement and volunteerism. The Maine Service Fellows has and will continue to assist rural communities in addressing the housing crisis and ensure our communities are resilient in the face of climate-related disasters. And, it will help with workforce development while retaining younger Mainers in state and in our rural towns.

With a fully-funded Maine Service Fellows program of 25 Fellows (20 through state funding and 5 through the NOAA IRA grant), this will allow each qualifying county to be able to have at least two Fellows providing for more consistent and broader coverage across our state.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions or to provide you with any information for your upcoming work session.