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Thank you, Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson and the committee members for hearing my testimony supporting LD1803.

My name is Jonathan Olmes; I am a Doctor of Optometry, and a small business owner, practicing in South Portland.

My support for LD1803 is grounded in my professional experience when referring patients to an ophthalmologist. The wait times, even in urban areas such as the Portland area, are long. The referral process is burdensome for both offices' staff. When I refer a patient to an ophthalmologist for a procedure, the patient must have a consultation visit then return for another visit to have the procedure completed. This redundancy not only inconveniences the patient but also significantly burdens the healthcare system, not to mention associated additional costs.

According to surveys conducted over six months with members of the Maine Optometric Association wait times for consultation appointments with ophthalmologists can extend up to 4 months for routine YAG laser capsulotomy. That consultation is then followed by an additional one-month wait for the actual procedure. For lesion removals, survey results indicated wait times ranging from 3 1/2 months to six months for the consultation alone. Procedures for glaucoma treatment, like Selective Laser Trabeculoplasty (SLT), were reported to have at least a three-month wait for consultation. Right now, we only have one glaucoma specialist in the whole state of Maine, so often if a patient needs an SLT we are forced to refer them to New Hampshire or Massachusetts.

Rural burdens are real as well. Some counties in Maine have no ophthalmologist. Patients currently travel multiple times to other cities for laser procedures, advanced glaucoma treatment, SLT, and lesion removals. This travel creates barriers in the form of missed work, additional costs, and delays in care. Often our patients need drivers to take them to their appointments which places additional burdens on them. In the underserved areas of Maine, this lack of transportation is a real problem. Expanding optometric privileges will provide timely, local access to necessary treatments.

There is a rising demand for these laser treatments, particularly for glaucoma, which are increasingly first-line therapies for the treatment of the disease. Maine's aging population is growing, with nearly a quarter of residents over 65, the highest in the nation. As this demographic expands, healthcare services, especially eye care, will face increased demand. A study by the American Academy of Ophthalmology predicts a 12% decrease in Ophthalmologists by 2035 and a 24% increase in service demand. It's clear that Doctors of Optometry must help address this workforce shortage in Maine. Doctors of Optometry are educated, trained, and certified to do these procedures; we can make the difference for Maine people. Please support LD 1803.