

# Invest in Maine workers. Invest in Maine.

## Pass LD 1956! Let's build Community-Workforce connections and modernize the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program!

With an aging workforce, Maine businesses are struggling to find well-trained workers to fill in-demand jobs. **LD 1956** invests in our workforce by modernizing the **Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP)**. It establishes funding for **peer workforce navigation** through the **Community Workforce Connections Program**. This is modeled on the pilot Peer Workforce Navigator Project involving 6 community organizations working in partnership with the Maine Department of Labor to build bridges between employers, the state, and job seekers. **Peer navigators help workers meet their basic needs so they can access education, find a good job, and thrive.**

### **"We're like community health workers,...but for the workforce!" - Peer Workforce Navigator, Houlton, ME**

Peer-to-peer resource navigation is an effective, data-driven model. Peer navigators leverage their relationships and lived experience with community members to help people overcome common barriers to stable employment, like housing insecurity, lack of education, or transportation. Navigator services are empathetic, localized, and culturally-appropriate. Navigators help people genuinely connect to resources in their community by building strong relationships and truly understanding the unique needs of each community member with whom they work.

### **"Peer support makes me feel human."**

*Jen's struggle with her mental and physical health meant she also struggled to keep a job and home. But this year, a friend introduced her to Joleen, a Peer Workforce Navigator in Bangor. Jen and Joleen's relationship shows the power of peer support. Joleen understood Jen's unique barriers to employment because of her own lived experience with homelessness. Joleen started bringing Jen to PWN Resource Fairs, and now Jen is gaining experience volunteering by recruiting other low-income people to come to the fairs too. "Being homeless, you can't just get a job by snapping your fingers," says Jen. "Before meeting Joleen, I was one of those people who would sit in a corner. But now I'm out here helping people too." With Joleen's help, Jen is preparing to take her first class to become a substance-abuse counselor. She is excited to take her first step on her way to meaningful work and financial stability. **"We work together, me and Joleen. She has shown me that everyone is a work in progress. Peer support makes me feel human."***



A 2024 study<sup>1</sup> by Columbia University found out-of-work Mainers assisted by a peer navigator:

1. **Acquired new jobs more quickly and at higher rates** when compared to other workers in the region.
2. **Connected to unemployment benefits faster** so they could more quickly return to the workforce.
3. Viewed Navigators as **"trusted messengers."**



<sup>1</sup> Read the study here:  
<https://peernav.short.gy/Study>



## Invest in Maine workers. Invest in Maine.

### LD 1956 builds Maine's workforce for a better economic future.

The Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) helps Mainers afford tuition *and* all the things they need to successfully gain in-demand skills through workforce training. This includes transportation, books, a laptop, childcare, and more. **CSSP empowers Maine workers and builds the workforce Maine so badly needs.**

### Marta's story

*Marta has a finance degree from West Africa. She and her husband were living in a hotel when they first arrived in Maine, but that didn't stop them from getting right to work. Marta's accounting degree didn't translate to the US economy, so she enrolled in a local accounting program. But she needed help figuring out how to pay for childcare and expenses so she could finish school and get a good job. With the help of the Peer Workforce Navigator team, Marta learned about CSSP, got help evaluating her credentials, submitting paperwork and negotiating her eligibility with MDOL. Since enrolling in CSSP, Marta has landed a job at a local bank. She loves applying what she is learning in her classes to her job, and looks forward to the day she is a certified accountant. CSSP and Peer Workforce Navigators help add skilled workers like Marta to Maine's workforce.*

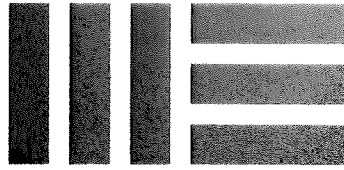
### CSSP works! Let's make it work for more Mainers!

- Six months after completing their CSSP sponsored, students **double** their income from six months before enrollment.
- **72%** of CSSP participants graduate from their program, compared to only **35%** of community college students.

### What does LD 1956 do?

- Expands CSSP income eligibility to 275% FPL, ensuring more low-income workers can access the program.
- Establishes ongoing funding, outside of the General Fund, for community-based peer workforce navigators.
- Offers CSSP support services to entire cohorts of workers participating in a shared class or program.
- Makes improvements to the CSSP application process, so more people who apply successfully enroll in training.
- **Connects more Mainers to employment and training opportunities!**





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**Testimony in Support of LD 1956: An Act to Amend the Laws Governing the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program and Establish the Community Workforce Connections Program**

May, 13 2025

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and honorable members of the joint committee on Labor,

I am Catherine Buxton, a policy advocate with Maine Equal Justice. Normally when I'm in front of this committee, I am handing you 8 pages of footnotes about unemployment insurance, but today I am excited to share stories of skilled, compassionate Peer Workforce Navigators who help workers from Houlton to Portland. I can certainly answer more complex questions about the bill; I am more than happy to speak to why LD 1956 is a positive return on investment for Maine employers, towns, and workers. But what I truly want to spend these 3 minutes doing is sharing the stories of real Mainers who have benefited from CSSP and navigator support.

First, and briefly, our origin story: At the height of the pandemic, Suzy, a volunteer from Waldo County was running a Facebook group with nearly 3000 Mainers who were struggling with unemployment and making ends meet. Suzy worked with staff from local organizations to troubleshoot people's problems around the clock and get people the answers they needed to make it through hard times. Meanwhile, down in Lewiston and Portland, an 18 year old college student, Hussein, was helping elders in his community with their claims. Suzy and Hussein couldn't come from more different backgrounds, but when they met, they became fast friends: sharing tips about the best ways to help their neighbors. These two everyday people helped hundreds of Mainers stay afloat through meaningful, community-based assistance. Thus, the idea of peer navigators was born. Numerous organizations connected with the state and said: Hey, wait: The helpers from totally different communities worked *together* so successfully: What if we could replicate this and help get people jobs or or navigate the workforce too? What if Peer Navigators could help **build** Maine's workforce?

The pilot Peer Workforce Navigator Project – which LD 1956 renames the Community-Workforce Connections Program – is now a collaboration of 6 community organizations across the state. We've helped over 1700 unique individuals get good jobs, training, or the unemployment insurance and income supports that help people thrive. Here are just two of so many stories from the pilot:

### **Alison's\* Story:**

Alison from Belfast worked in grocery stores and farmers markets until 2023 when she had to quit because of a debilitating medical condition. She reached out to Leslie, a Navigator, panicked because she couldn't no longer work in her field and her savings were running out fast. Leslie understood what Alison was going through – having a disability herself. Leslie helped Alison find safety net programs to keep the heat on and food on the table. Alison had a discouraging experience at a CareerCenter and didn't want to go back, but Leslie helped rebuild that bridge and convinced her to take a look at MDOL programs for her needs: like Vocational Rehab and CSSP. Leslie helped her find finance classes so she could get a remote or office job. She helped her prepare her application for CSSP and explain her need for a career-change. A few months later, Leslie checked back in – Alison texted, so excited. She had her final interviews for the **perfect** job – a remote finance specialist for a local food incubator. And, I'm proud to say: Alison got the job and has been working there for over a year.

### **Martin's\* story:**

Martin was laid off from his temporary, manufacturing job. He was one of the first people to come to our Peer Workforce clinics we'd just launched because he knew Marcel, the Portland Navigator, through friends. While Martin came in for help with his unemployment claim, he was adamant: "I'm sick of unemployment. I need a good, consistent job." This is what we hear from nearly every person we help: "I want to work."

Martin came into the clinic every single week, extra early sometimes. "At home, I am an electrician. I can be one here too." He told me – he was proud of the work he could do. One day, the Navigators had invited Sam Boss - who you'll hear from today – to recruit for the Construction Academy pre-apprenticeship program. Martin was first in line to meet with him.

I later attended the program's graduation, and immediately recognized Martin in the crowd. His wife and baby girl were in attendance, and you could tell how proud they were – this felt like a first step to really making it here. Now, I see Martin all over town. He works for our city's Public Works department: a stable, career job, with benefits. Whenever I pass him, we smile and wave to each other, and I am reminded how the Navigator program has connected people to the workforce through community, and improved our whole community as a result.

*(\*Names have been changed to respect the privacy of our clients.)*

**Peer workforce navigations and CSSP deliver on the promise to upskill Maine workers and increase labor force participation.** 72% of CSSP participants graduated or successfully completed their degree program in 2024, compared to only 35% of community college students not in the

program.<sup>1</sup> We know from economic research that programs that result in a credential result in higher wages, better job security, and help people move more quickly off public benefits. too<sup>2</sup> In the 2024 CSSP report, MDOL observed that 6 months after finishing their degree, CSSP participants nearly doubled their earnings.<sup>3</sup> LD 1956 ensures these results will become available to many more people, including those most serious barriers to sustainable employment.

The proposed CSSP cohort program is another data-backed innovation for workforce development. For example, in a study of an Early Childhood Education Apprenticeships<sup>4</sup> researchers found cohort models led to increased program completion, with 95% of students completing the program, 3 times higher than the national average. Cohort models also increased grade point averages and post-program networking connections.<sup>5</sup>

Not only do trained workers combat labor shortages, but studies have also shown that more educated or trained workforces grow local economies by attracting more businesses *and* more talented workers in a virtuous economic cycle.<sup>6</sup>

LD 1956 is supported by stakeholders as diverse as the constituents we serve, who all see the value in these programs. I urge you to take a look at testimony submitted by the Portland Chamber of Commerce and Maine Health and read testimony from the workers who have benefitted from the program.

Thank you for your time and I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you may have.

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<sup>1</sup> Maine Department of Labor, 2024 CSSP Annual Report, February 1, 2025, <https://www.mainecareercenter.gov/docs/2025/cssp/CSSPAnnualReport2024.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Harper-Anderson, Elsie, What Is the Return on Investment for Public Workforce Programs? An Analysis of WIA and TAA in Virginia, State & Local Government Review, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2019)

<sup>3</sup> MDOL (n 1)

<sup>4</sup> <https://ecepts.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Impact-of-Cohort-Learning-Case-Study.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cailin Slattery and Owen Zidar, "Evaluating State and Local Business Incentives," The Journal of Economic Perspectives, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 90-118