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THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

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**Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services on
LD 1772, An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Blue Ribbon
Commission to Design a Plan for Sustained Investment in Preventing
Disease and Improving the Health of Maine Communities
January 7, 2026**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on LD 1772, "An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission to Design a Plan for Sustained Investment in Preventing Disease and Improving the Health of Maine Communities." I submitted this bill after serving on this Commission in the fall of 2023, alongside Representative Graham, Senator Rotundo, Representative Ducharme, the Honorable Linda Sanborn, the Honorable Elsie Flemings, Attorney General Frey, Ana Hicks from the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future, and seven public health and economics professionals.

Establishing this Blue Ribbon Commission received overwhelming bipartisan support from this body because here in Maine we are pragmatic and practical, recognizing the importance of prevention and public health – not just for its value to each of us as individuals, but for its beneficial impacts on our economy and the vibrancy of our communities. Maine's use of tobacco settlement dollars in the creation of the Fund for a Healthy Maine is just one example of our shared commitment.

Our Commission's work focused primarily on investigating public health funding in the State and identifying ways, including learning from other states, to improve stability, transparency, and alignment between why health-related funds are received and how they are used. We proposed a series of unanimous, bipartisan recommendations, which you can see in our final report to the legislature.

My original bill sought to advance those recommendations. I understand the importance of careful consideration and measured pacing, and with the limited time of this short session, and the many interconnected systems to be considered, I have worked with public health stakeholders and legislative colleagues on an amendment that I believe embodies the spirit of the Commission's recommendations but an approach that starts with smaller, more incremental change than my original bill had proposed.

The proposed amendment establishes the Maine Commission on Public Health and Prevention, which is a 13-member body that will assist and advise the Legislature on

evidence-based public health policies. While your committee is charged with primary oversight of public health policies, given the breadth of the field, multiple other committees, including Appropriations, oversee public health issues as well, including housing, transportation, environmental health, and healthcare access. This Commission would be available to assist with providing information on those other issues, bolstering the role of evidence in public health policymaking. I support broad representation on this Commission, including the perspectives of older adults, as suggested by the Maine Council on Aging.

The bill also establishes the Fund for a Healthy Maine Stabilization Account, which would be funded by a portion of dispute payments and which will 1) fund the work of the Commission; 2) support the Maine CDC in developing and promoting a state health plan – the road map to identifying and responding to public health threats in our state; and 3) work toward eliminating the need for a working capital advance that programs in the Fund for a Healthy Maine currently depend upon.

I have had the honor of serving on multiple boards, commissions, and standing committees through my time in the legislature, and I know how challenging it can be to make policy decisions when we are not content experts ourselves. I am repeatedly grateful for that service as I learn from colleagues and constituents with far greater depth of expertise in various topics than I could ever possess alone. I care about improving public health in Maine and believe strongly that we need greater involvement from our constituents, our resident experts, in responding to the ever increasingly complex public health challenges we face. This bill would allow us to do that and would help us improve our road map – our state health plan – to resolving those challenges. It will also improve our fiscal health and accountability.

I want to thank those who prepared testimony for today – whether *for or against* – and those who reached out with concerns and suggestions. I'm grateful for the feedback, and I'm committed to working collaboratively on a solution that improves and advances public health planning and financial security and accountability for our special sources of revenue, including the Fund for a Healthy Maine.

Thank you for your consideration, and for your continued leadership on these critical issues.