

Testimony for LD 2147 (Upward Bound River Valley Bill)

By: Abby Waceken
01/21/2026

Good morning, everyone. My name is Abby Waceken and I am a resident of Farmington, Maine. I am here not as a representative of any institution, or my employer, but as a concerned citizen who has seen first-hand the impact of this particular Upward Bound program.

I started my journey working for UMF Upward Bound as a summer staff member in 2020, and then went on to be hired as a full-time staff member in 2022. I have worked in my role as an academic counselor for the last 4 years and in that time, I have seen many lives changed for the better by our Upward Bound program. This September, my colleagues and I received news that both shocked and devastated us; we learned, through a non-continuation notice, that one of our two grants would be prematurely ended on October 1 of 2025.

This grant, called the “River Valley” grant, served 60 students in 6 high schools across western Maine. What this meant is that of the 139 students that we would typically serve in our program, 60 of them lost all access to the resources and help provided by Upward Bound, access that they had been promised until their high school graduation. As you can imagine, our students were quite distraught when receiving this news. For many of them, Upward Bound is so much more than just a college prep program; it is a lifeline, a safe place, and a CRUCIAL support system while they’re in high school.

These students are intelligent, motivated, and desperately want to attend college and earn a degree. But, there are a lot of barriers to higher education when you live in poverty and nobody in your family has ever attended college. Of the students that we served through the River Valley grant, 66% of them were considered to be “low-income,” which meant that their family’s total income for the year did not exceed 150 percent of the federal poverty level amount. To put this into perspective, in 2026 this would mean that a family of 3 would have to have a yearly income of \$40,980 or less; A family of 5 would have to have an income of less than \$58,020.

Because of the devastating effects of poverty, many of our students have experienced firsthand things that no human should ever have to go through. I’ve personally worked with students that have experienced traumas such as food insecurity (not having enough to eat), a lack of access to proper medical/dental care, having utilities shut off or disconnected at home, homelessness (living in a motel), evictions or frequent moving,

not having money to afford new clothing and shoes when needed, a lack of access to reliable transportation, and so much more. For many of these students, education is the only way for them to escape these dire circumstances.

The data tells us that programs like Upward Bound work; UB students are more than twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24 compared to other students in the lowest income bracket. Many of our alumni tell us that they never would have made it to college without the support provided by our UB program. This bill is being presented by Senator Jill Duson, an Upward Bound alumni herself who knows just how valuable these programs are. LD 2147 would fund the River Valley grant for one more year. With this funding, River Valley students would be able to access the Upward Bound resources and help that they have been denied since October of 2025. This assistance includes FREE academic counseling, tutoring, college visits, help with the college application process, fee waivers for college applications + the SAT, as well as the opportunity to attend a residential summer program that takes place on the UMF campus each summer. But most importantly, this bill would restore our River Valley students' hopes and dreams for the future. Thank you all for your time and consideration on this matter.



TRIO Upward Bound 23/24 Fact Sheet



139
PARTICIPANTS

3.5m
IN FEDERAL FUNDING

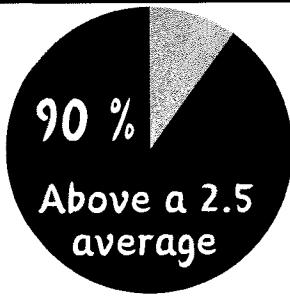
10
COLLEGES
VISITED

71 %
FIRST-GENERATION
LOW-INCOME
STUDENTS

10
TRIPS & EVENTS

Fall Reunion | VT Leadership Conference
| Ambassador Training | Northern ME
Trip | Vermont Trip | Winter Reunion |
SRP Play | TRIO Day | Boston Aquarium |
Summer Orientation

GPA



Persistence

100 % of students persisted
to next grade level

2024 SENIOR HIGHLIGHTS

57 senior graduates

100 % graduated from high school

81 % of seniors enrolled in college

TRIO

UPWARD BOUND

- Buckfield Jr-Sr HS
- Carrabec HS
- Dirigo HS
- Edward Little HS
- Lawrence HS
- Madison Area Memorial HS
- Mt. Abram HS
- Mt. Blue High School
- Mt. Valley HS
- Oxford Hills HS
- Skowhegan Area HS
- Spruce Mountain HS
- Telstar HS
- Waterville HS