



**Testimony of Jessica Fay for
The Maine Council on Aging
Feb. 17, 2026
LD 2212 – MaineCare Section**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Jess Fay and I am the Policy and Advocacy Director for the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA), a broad, multidisciplinary network of over 140 organizations, businesses, municipalities, and older community members working to ensure we can all live healthy, engaged, and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age at home and in community settings. I am also here as a member of Maine's Essential Care & Support Workforce Partnership. The Partnership is a coalition of over 300 providers, care workers and family members collaborating to build the conditions needed to support a strong care workforce. We are offering testimony neither for nor against the proposed supplemental budget.

We testify neither for nor against this Supplemental budget because we believe this proposal does not reflect the moral and statutory commitments the Legislature has made to the people of Maine. Your past actions have clearly shown that people who are eligible for care under the laws of this state and nation should receive that care. Thank you.

Five years ago, these two committees did great work building a system that created stability and predictability for essential care and support workers and the people who are entitled to care in Maine. You did two critical things – you set the labor portion of the MaineCare rate for this work to 125% above minimum wage, and you required COLAs to be paid each year to ensure increases in years when reimbursement rates were not being reviewed. This sent an important message to care workers that the work they do is important and valued. It also created a reliable way for providers to budget for growth. What you did was good policy and created new growth in the workforce which began to reduce the care gap, meaning more Mainers were getting care.

Unfortunately, because of the way we budget, when the workforce expanded and more people got care, this caused a deficit. Instead of requesting an appropriation to maintain the workforce and the meet people's care needs, the Department did not issue the required COLAs and has not requested them – either in the biennial or in this supplemental. These decisions were made outside of the legislative process without notification to you or to those providing care. These actions are undoing the good work you did to begin to grow the workforce. Until we appropriate sufficient funds to ensure steady growth in this workforce and a reduction in the growing care gap, we will continue in a cycle that leaves older vulnerable people without care, ultimately costing us more.

Just for the care of older people who are nursing home eligible but elect to receive care at home, more than *23,500 hours of care goes undelivered every week*. Without care people become sicker and need even higher levels of care that cost more. We all want to live healthy and meaningful lives as we age. When we deny people the care they need because we don't fund it, we also deny them the opportunity to contribute to our communities and to live their lives in the way they choose. This is a choice we make - you have the opportunity in this supplemental budget to make the choice to fully fund COLAS for care workers.

Ongoing funding to meet increasing needs is critical. And we urge structural funding in the budget for COLAS. To the extent that these committees contemplate using the Budget Stabilization Fund, we urge you to set aside funding for strategies that have proven effective in retaining current workers and growing the essential care and support workforce. This supplemental budget proposes permanent breaks for large corporations at the expense of ongoing support for direct care. If we claim to value workers and those they care for, then we need to appropriate the funds necessary for that care.

This should not come at the expense of other important supports for older people, including investments in affordable housing, community supports and food security. There are bills available now to raise the revenue needed to meet the needs of older people and all of us. We encourage you to consider those options.

As Mainers age, the need for quality long-term care will only increase. Making an investment now to improve job quality for those who make up the foundation of our healthcare system means that we won't continue to fall further behind. We would like to thank the Long-term Care Ombudsman for recognizing the importance of the essential care and support workforce to quality care in the system and for supporting the Direct Care and Support Professional Advisory Council and request that LTCOP receive the funding necessary to continue this and the other important work they do advocating for people in long-term care.

As the crisis in care continues to grow and threaten access to care for all of us, many workers, providers, carers and policy experts have come together as Maine's Essential Care and Support Workforce Partnership¹ to collaborate on solutions that include the use of technology, streamlining training and credentialing, and advocating for adequate funding so that MaineCare providers can pay the people who do the difficult work of caring the wages they deserve. We are proud of the work done to date and are looking forward to working with all of you to move that work forward in support of a strong care economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

¹ <https://essentialworkforce.org/>