



**LEGAL SERVICES
FOR MAINE ELDERS**

Testimony of Marge Kilkelly for Legal Services for Maine Elders
Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services

Good afternoon, Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, and esteemed Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services.

My name is Marge Kilkelly, and I am here today on behalf of Legal Services for Maine Elders. LSE provides free legal help for Mainers aged 60 and older when their basic human needs are at stake. LSE serves older Mainers across the state. Our clients are generally low-income, some with medically complex conditions.

I am speaking today in strong support of both dental bills before you, which came from the Commission to Expand Access to Oral Health Care by Studying 31 Alternative Pathways for Obtaining a License to Practice Dentistry.

LD 2209 Resolve, to Direct the Department of Health and Human Services to Develop Innovative Models for the Delivery of Dental Services to Expand Access to Oral Health Care Throughout the State
LD 2206 An Act Expanding Access to Oral Health Care by Creating a New Path for Obtaining a License to Practice Dentistry.

Oral health is essential healthcare. In 1840 the first dental school was established- because medical schools dismissed dentistry as an apprenticeship model not a science based formal education model. In 1965 the Medicare statute explicitly excluded dental care viewing it as cosmetic, luxury or just routine maintenance. Even today, many of us struggle with the complexities of Dental Insurance vs Health Insurance.

We have learned so much since 1840! Oral health is essential and the consequences of lack of care are well documented.

- Heart Attack: People with gum disease are estimated to be 20% to 28% more likely to suffer a heart attack.
- Stroke: There is a threefold increase in the risk of having a stroke for those with severe periodontal disease.
- Atrial Fibrillation: Severe gum disease is associated with a 31% higher risk of developing this rapid heart rhythm disorder.
- Hypertension: Moderate-to-severe periodontitis is linked to a 20%–50% increased risk of high blood pressure.
- Social Isolation: Older people with tooth loss often withdraw from social activities leading to depression and loneliness.
- Malnutrition: Maintaining oral health also supports essential functions like eating, chewing, and speaking, which prevents malnutrition

Maine, especially rural Maine has struggled for years with issues of dental access. While MaineCare expanded coverage for adults in 2022 many providers limit MaineCare patients because of low reimbursement rates.

Finding creative solution to address the issue of dental care access and availability is exactly what we do in Maine. We appreciate the work of the study commission and offer our assistance to this Committee as you deliberate these proposals. The work is critical to the health of all Mainers especially older Mainers.

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