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Testimony in support of LD 1514
An Act To Conform Maine Law to the Requirements of the American Dental Association Commission.
Ann Woloson, Policy Analyst, Maine Equal Justice Partners

Senator Volk, Representative Herbig and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor, Commerce, Research and Economic Development.

I am Ann Woloson, Policy Analyst with Maine Equal Justice Partners and I am here today to testify in support of LD 1514, An Act To Conform Maine Law to the Requirements of the American Dental Association Commission. Maine Equal Justice Partners is a nonprofit legal services organization representing the interests of people with low income in the courts and before the legislature and administrative agencies.

Maine Equal Justice Partners supports this proposed legislation as we believe it provides a piece to the puzzle needed to improve access to quality and affordable oral health care in Maine. I have been involved in the effort to improve access to oral health care for nearly 30 years. There have been various attempts to improve access over the years, especially for people with low income who struggle to access affordable and effective preventive care and treatment. These efforts have included working to attract new dentists to our state and working with the Finance Authority of Maine to help reduce education loan debt. I have worked with the Maine Dental Association and its various chapters throughout the state to better understand the challenges dental practices experience in providing care to people with low income in an attempt to address those challenges, including working to improve reimbursement rates under the state Medicaid Program. I've also worked on educational initiatives aimed at improving access to fluoride early on to those who can benefit and in reducing dental related emergency room visits. While these efforts have helped some, we know that there continues to be a serious access problem in Maine, especially for people with low income that needs to be addressed. While we should continue to explore and work on the issues I've described, we should also consider and implement approaches that are currently working and making a difference in other states.

You have heard the statistics. Over a third of Maine people do not have a dentist. Less than half of children with MaineCare coverage received a dental service in 2010, dropping to about 35 % in 2011. We spend millions of dollars on avoidable dental related emergency room visits and Maine's ER rate for such care has been about 30% above the national average. Our dentists are retiring and while new licenses are being issued in Maine, we need to do more to attract and keep dentists in our state. Finally, most counties in Maine are designated as dental shortage areas.

It's clear that Dental Hygiene Therapy (DHT) is being used effectively in other states and other countries as means for improving access to quality oral health care. A study of dental hygiene therapy in Minnesota shows that DHT is working to:

- Increase the capacity of dental clinics to serve new patients,
- Reduce the wait time new patients experience in receiving preventive care or treatment,
- Reduce the amount of travel time some patients experience,
- increase dental team productivity and create savings in personnel costs, and
- to improve patient satisfaction.

Other preliminary findings show that Dental Therapists are serving low-income, uninsured and underserved patients and that the expanded capacity and improved access may reduce unnecessary ER use by vulnerable populations.

The proposed legislation will help build Maine's dental work force and capacity in a rational, safe way. It will help those dental practices that are willing to treat low-income patients and people with MaineCare, to expand their practices and provide quality care to those who may otherwise go without. The proposed bill will make sure that Dental Hygiene Therapists are required to receive a bachelor degree in science or higher in dental hygiene therapy education that is accredited by the American Dental Association Commission on Dental Accreditation or by a program approved by the Maine Board of Dental Examiners. They will also need to pass a comprehensive, competency-based clinical examination. If this proposed legislation is passed, it will be clear that dental hygiene therapists practicing in Maine will have received adequate, comprehensive training and will have demonstrated proof of their skills, knowledge and competency before becoming licensed.

We believe that by ensuring dental hygiene therapists are well trained, according to stringent standards established by the American Dental Association Commission on Dental Accreditation, that they will help to improve access to quality oral health care, reduce dental related pain and infection and prevent unnecessary tooth loss in Maine. Dental Hygiene Therapists are serving helping to improve access to care for children in Minnesota and Alaska and we believe they will also be helpful in preventing tooth decay and gum disease at an early age for children in Maine.

Please support LD 1514 as part of the effort to improve access to quality and affordable oral health care in Maine.

Thank you.