



Testimony of the Island Institute in Support of LD 143, An Act to Support Rural Service Programming and Promote Volunteerism

January 31, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Stephanie Welch, and I am offering this testimony on behalf of the Island Institute in support of LD 143.

The Island Institute is a 40-year-old nonprofit organization based in Rockland, Maine. We work to sustain Maine's island and coastal communities and are committed to a just, resilient, and vibrant future for the coast of Maine. We work in partnership with leaders in these communities to support resiliency in the face of a changing world. The Island Institute's community development work focuses on the marine economy, climate and energy solutions, small business, education, and leadership.

Seventy-five percent of Maine's coastal communities have fewer than 3,500 people, and 25 percent of coastal communities have fewer than 800 people. Further, as the Maine Won't Wait climate action plan from the Maine Climate Council notes, only 11 percent of Maine communities have a town planner on staff, and 72 percent have no local planner and insufficient or no regional planning support. Throughout our state, rural communities face significant capacity challenges to building community and economic resilience.

As an organization that supports community and economic development work in some of the state's most remote communities, we regularly see the difference an extra set of hands can make. In the last 22 years, we have placed 143 Island Fellows in 27 rural communities. Collectively, these fellows have contributed about 370,750 hours of direct technical assistance to community identified projects.

We have seen the impact that comes from much-needed support and a fresh perspective. In communities where every leader wears multiple hats, having a fellow could mean that the extra capacity is there for a crucial planning or implementation piece that could not have been achieved otherwise. The benefits of a fellow also extend into the fabric of the larger community. We've heard from many fellows that there is work that is written into their project and then "work" that is not. From helping to plan potlucks or coaching sports teams to being a member of the town's EMS, most fellows really do become community members.

Growing the Maine Service Fellows program would enable that extra capacity rural communities require for specific, time-bound projects. I strongly encourage you to expand this program in support of Maine's rural communities in close calibration with the necessary staff required to support a larger cohort.