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TO: Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and Members of the
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
FROM: Becky Smith, Director of Government and Community Relations
RE: Statement on Vaccines
DATE: April 3, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, please accept this statement as you consider the myriad of vaccine bills before you today.

The Maine Community College System believes in the safety and efficacy of vaccines and requires students attending classes on campus to provide proof of immunizations currently required by state law. We believe allowing medical exemptions and prohibiting religious and philosophical exemptions from state mandated vaccines continues to be a solid public health strategy.

We also feel very strongly that our Board of Trustees' ability and responsibility to protect the health of our students, faculty, adjunct faculty, and staff needs to allow us to consider all public health measures, including vaccines approved under an Emergency Use Authorization. We rely on advice from public health officials, medical advisors, and our internal campus experts about how to maintain the health and welfare of our communities.

Having said that, many of our students have low incomes and are struggling to make ends meet. The added cost of immunizations and required boosters, while a seemingly insignificant amount to some, may be an unaffordable expense and yet another barrier to education for some of our students. These concerns could be mitigated by free or at least very reduced-price vaccines available at convenient locations and times and we are always willing to partner with the Maine Immunization Program to host clinics on our campuses.

As you know, we closed our campuses in March of 2020 in response to the COVID pandemic. As we worked to reopen our doors the next fall and to expand our on-campus offerings through that academic year and the next, the ability to require vaccines was integral to our ability to teach in-person courses. We removed this requirement when our medical advisors informed us that the requirement was no longer the recommended approach to combat COVID on our campuses. However, if public health and medical advisors advise us to reinstate that requirement, or recommend a vaccine for a different reason, the Board of Trustees needs to be able to set the appropriate policy without political constraints.

We respectfully recommend that you vote Ought Not to Pass on any bill that will constrain the Maine Community College System's ability to manage the health of our campuses.