



**Testimony of Maine Public Health Association In Support of:
LD 1555: An Act To Fund Broadband Internet Infrastructure for Marginalized Groups in the State**

Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology
Room 211, Cross State Office Building
Tuesday, April 27, 2021

Good morning Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology. My name is Rebecca Boulos. I am a resident of South Portland and executive director of Maine Public Health Association. MPHA supports LD 1555: “An Act To Fund Broadband Internet Infrastructure for Marginalized Groups in the State.”

MPHA is the state’s oldest, largest, and most diverse association for public health professionals. We represent more than 500 individual members and 30 organizations across the state. The mission of MPHA is to improve and sustain the health and well-being of all people in Maine through health promotion, disease prevention, and the advancement of health equity. As a statewide nonprofit association, we advocate, act, and advise on critical public health challenges, aiming to improve the policies, systems, and environments that underlie health inequities – but which also have potential to improve health outcomes for all people in Maine. We are not tied to a national agenda, which means we are responsive to the needs of Maine’s communities and we take that responsibility seriously.

This bill appropriates funds to the ConnectMaine Authority to provide broadband internet infrastructure to benefit marginalized groups, including historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous, and tribal communities, individuals who were formerly incarcerated or are unhoused, individuals in substance use disorder recovery and low-income individuals. The ConnectMaine Authority is directed to consult with organizations representing these groups when making determinations regarding the distribution of funds.

There are many factors that control our health, including clean air and water, access to healthcare and quality education, well-paying, regular employment, and social connections. As such, access to broadband is a public health issue – in fact, it is considered a “super-determinant of health.”¹ Broadband access serves as a gateway to several services associated with health: it means adults can search and apply for jobs (and/or work from home); take online courses; pay bills; and access healthcare, including signing up for health insurance and communicating with their provider. It means schoolchildren can do their homework at home – and not at the local fast-food restaurant that has internet. It also means families can access Maine’s [Department of Environmental Protection’s Air Quality Forecasts](#), and can search for and purchase water testing kits. Broadband improves accessibility of healthcare through telehealth. Through email and social network sites, broadband can also reduce social isolation and loneliness, two contributing factors of poor health outcomes, particularly among older adults. According to the National Institute on Aging, “[research](#) has linked social isolation and loneliness to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental conditions: [high blood pressure](#), [heart disease](#), [obesity](#), a weakened immune system, anxiety, [depression](#), [cognitive decline](#), [Alzheimer’s disease](#), and even death. People who find themselves unexpectedly alone due to the death of a spouse or partner, separation from friends or family, retirement, loss of mobility, and lack of transportation are at particular risk.”²

The Federal Communications Commission published a platform, “[Mapping Broadband Health in America](#),” which allows users to visualize, overlay and analyze broadband and health data at the national, state and county levels. The platform demonstrates clear associations between health disparities and gaps in broadband access across the country.

Broadband access is a public health and health equity issue, and we strongly support this legislation. Therefore, we respectfully ask you to vote LD 1555 “Ought to Pass.” Thank you for your consideration.

¹Bauerly BC, McCord RF, Hulkower R & Pepin D. 2019. Broadband access as a public health issue: The role of law in expanding broadband access and connecting underserved communities for better health outcomes. *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 47(2_suppl), 39–42.

²National Institute on Aging. 2019. [Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks](#).