

Testimony of Dr. Jonnathan Busko, MD, MPH a Resident of Bangor, Maine,
in support of
LD 940, An Act To Allow Pharmacists To Provide Services Through Telehealth and Vending
Machines at Federally Qualified Health Centers

March 14, 2023

Dear Chair Perry, Chair Bailey, and members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services,

I'm Jonnathan Busko, an emergency physician in Bangor. I've come before this committee in the past to support bills that address rural health care access. I am the designer of and medical director for the "Jackman Critical Access Physician Extender Project," a demonstration project using telehealth and advanced practice paramedics to assure that Moose River Valley residents have 24-hour a day access to urgent and emergency care services, and have been involved in a number of other health care service access projects over the years in Maine's rural and frontier communities.

Timely access to all aspects of healthcare, including pharmacy services such as prescription and over the counter medications, is often difficult in Maine communities due to travel distances and transportation challenges. In the era of prescription mail delivery, many patients are now able to access their long-term medications in a reasonably convenient and reliable way. However, acute medications such as antibiotics, pain relievers, long-term medications being started for new diagnoses, and many others can be much more difficult to access due to distance and timing of pharmacy hours. These barriers lead to delays in starting potentially life-saving therapies. We see this regularly in Jackman, particularly for the Thursday evening through Monday morning stretch when the Community Health Center is closed for routine medical services.

While some small Maine communities have local pharmacies, many others do not, and the nearest pharmacy may be an hour or more away. Furthermore, with the exception of the greater Portland area and south, Maine communities do not have access to 24-hour a day pharmacies. While this may not matter in many cases, any patient seen in an emergency department north of Portland after 7 pm is unlikely to be able to fill a prescription before 9 am the following morning. This has led to convoluted patterns of hospital dispensing that are not optimal for patients or hospitals.

It is with this in mind that I support LD 940 but would ask that the committee consider including locations of service above and beyond Federally Qualified Health Centers. The Maine Pharmacy Board regulations already allow non-retail dispensing of medications from vending-type machines in nursing and correctional facilities by a limited group of appropriately trained individuals under the supervision of a remote pharmacist. To improve community access, locally manned retail tele-pharmacy services could be safely performed in a number of medical sites including skilled nursing facilities, nursing homes, emergency departments, rural health

clinics, and EMS stations. The Maine Board of Pharmacy has comprehensive rules on the operational and infrastructure requirements for such dispensing units. By identifying a list of medically appropriate sites staffed by qualified non-pharmacist personnel that could house such units and operations, communities would be given the opportunity to make the commitment necessary to assure timely local access to prescription medications (and non-prescription medications, as such manned vending units are capable of dispensing both). In essence, through agreements with pharmacists, training, and infrastructure, personnel at the vending machine sites would essentially act as pharmacy technicians for the remote pharmacists.

In summary, I believe that LD 940 as written has the potential to expand Mainers' access to retail pharmacy services and prescriptions. However, limiting it to only one type of medical site, federally qualified health centers, would miss a significant opportunity to more widely expand safe access to retail pharmacy services through a number of medical venues, all under the supervision and strong regulatory processes of the Maine Board of Pharmacy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'J. Busko', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jonnathan Busko MD, MPH