

Testimony in Support of LD 1336, An Act to Establish the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council

Helen Carter
Camden, Maine

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development,

My name is Helen Carter, and I'm from Camden, Maine. I'm here to express my support for LD 1336, *An Act to Establish the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council*.

My first experience with Aomori came through a middle school exchange program. Through the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Program, I had the chance to host a student from Aomori, and that experience had a huge impact on me. Growing up in a small town in Maine, that kind of cultural connection wasn't something we came across every day. Hosting a student opened my eyes to a new way of life—and it wasn't just me. My sisters also hosted students, and eventually, my younger brother was able to visit Aomori himself and stay with a host family. These early experiences ignited a sense of global curiosity that has stayed with us, encouraging us to keep exploring, learning, and connecting with people from different cultures.

But my connection with Aomori didn't end there. My partner's father is from Aomori, and over the past few years I've worked in his Japanese restaurants, learning firsthand about Japanese food, culture, and hospitality. Now, I'm preparing to open two new businesses with my partner and his family: *Aomori Restaurant* and *Aomori Market*. While both businesses will offer a range of Japanese food, we're putting a special focus on dishes and design elements from Aomori. From what's on the menu to the crafts on the walls, we want to share what makes that region unique.

That initial connection to Aomori helped lay the foundation for what would later become both a personal and professional interest in Japanese culture. It's a reminder of how meaningful these early exchanges can be.

The sister-state relationship between Maine and Aomori creates real, lasting impacts in people's lives. It encourages curiosity, cultural understanding, and even entrepreneurship. Establishing an advisory council will help ensure that these kinds of experiences remain available to future generations of Mainers.

Thank you for your time, and I encourage you to support LD 1336.