

Dear Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Renée Berry-Huffman. I am a resident of South Portland and a disability advocate. I was diagnosed in 1996 with multiple sclerosis and I am here to testify in support of LD 17.

In the early days of having MS, I walked with a cane and could walk to the bus stop to wait outside for the bus. I'm now in a power wheelchair, but I haven't always been in a power chair. For a while I walked with a cane, a walker, a rollator, and pushed myself in a manual wheelchair. Over the years my MS has worsened and I no longer have the strength to stand outside by myself. My doctor told me about MaineCare's transportation program where I could schedule a ride, and get picked up at my door to go where I had to go. I rely on transportation to get to my medical appointments including physical therapy and counseling, as well as grocery shopping, going to the library, or having lunch with friends. I have relied on MaineCare, and Logisticare transportation services since the late 1990s.

MaineCare eventually became Logisticare, and matters worsened as they refused to incorporate client feedback. Not only can it take up to thirty minutes to book a ride, I would go through all that trouble and the ride would arrive late, making me late to my appointments, at which point I would be penalized for tardiness or marked as a "no show." Just the other day my doctor requested that I go to NorDx to have my blood drawn for a test, so I called up Logisticare, and went through a long drawn out process to book the ride, just to find out that my ride has been denied because I didn't give them 48 hours notice.

I've been traumatized by Logisticare's negligence and lack of empathy time and time again. There has to be another model that will respond to seniors and disabled people's urgent transportation needs. The current system does not prioritize what people really need. Each driver has their own way of interacting with passengers as they get on board. Riders are expected to climb up the ramp and get to their own seat without assistance, which has been the structure of the program. There was a time when a driver tried to take me in a different location, to an isolated area. When I called Logisticare, they refused to deal with it, pretended it didn't happen, and implied I didn't know what I was talking about. From then on I would do whatever I could to avoid Logisticare. I would rather use Regional Transportation Program (RTP). I went through so much with Logisticare. I used Metro but haven't been back since my great toe was really injured by a ramp coming down on it. (4/30/2020). This injury hasn't been resolved with them yet.

There are those who live in rural areas who do not have the ability to access a nearby bus stop.

Transportation for a disabled person is freedom. Having a disability is personal. Not everybody is fortunate enough to have a car or the ability to drive. My 28-year-old daughter is my full-time caretaker and she depends on having the peace of mind that I'm being transported in a reliable manner when she's not with me. I know there are many other families and individuals who would benefit from dependable and safe means of transportation. I urge you to pass LD 17. This bill would contribute to a statewide plan to build a more robust public transportation infrastructure and create employment opportunities for all Maine people, including new immigrants who often work as transportation providers. I am hopeful for a more reliable, caring, on-demand transportation service, an important step towards re-envisioning a system that has failed to serve us.

Thank you for your time.

Renée Berry-Huffman
South Portland