

Testimony, Wednesday, February 10, 2021, 1 pm

Committee on Health and Human Services

LD 47: An Act to Fund the State's Free Health Clinics

To: Sen. Claxton, Sen. Baldacci, Sen. Moore and Representatives

I am Leslie Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN. I am the Coordinator at the Portland Community Free Clinic (PCFC), a role I have held since 2009. I have been involved with the PCFC as a volunteer and per diem nurse since 2001. The PCFC is very near and dear to my heart. I write in support of LD 47.

The PCFC is located at 103 India Street in Portland, a site we share with other City of Portland programs. In March 2020, a staff member in the building tested positive for COVID-19 and when that happened, all on-site operations ceased for two weeks. Even with a pandemic, patients need to be seen, their medications need to be refilled, and their needs must be addressed. We operated remotely for two weeks then began a phased re-opening of in-person care on March 30th. By June 1st we were back to full operations. "On the fly" we created a telehealth program to schedule appointments for patients who could not be seen on-site. In 10 months, we have had 168 telehealth appointments, the large majority of which are for counseling and behavioral health. Prior to April, we had seen zero patients by telehealth.

As the pandemic drags on, our services are in increasing demand. New patients are coming to us because they have lost their jobs and their health insurance. Former patients are also returning. Patients are presenting with increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, weight gain, disordered sleep, and changes in their nutritional and bowel status. We do not see patients with COVID symptoms (and we are not doing COVID testing on-site) but the ripple effects of COVID in the patients we see are apparent. Patients talk to me about the "before times" and wonder if things will ever get back to normal. I do not have an answer for that question.

The PCFC was established in 1993. We are a volunteer model clinic with a roster of 108 physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, receptionists, counselors, and a physical therapist. I have always been acutely aware of the need for our safety-net healthcare services, but I believe that 2020 pushed us to the limit. Of course, the need for our services has been ramping up for several years. In 2015 the free clinic in Biddeford closed. In 2019, a free clinic in Buxton also closed. Historically, we confined our service area to Cumberland County but we eliminated that requirement with the changes in free services available to uninsured patients in Maine. In 2019 and 2020, we saw patients from 9 different counties in the state. We are the largest free clinic in Maine and see close to 500 patients annually in more than 1800 encounters.

The Friends of the PCFC is our non-profit funding partner. Since 2013, the Friends have been successful in raising the funds needed to keep the PCFC open, but the fundraising cycle is relentless. Funds to support the PCFC from LD 47 would give us a small cushion and allow us to recruit more volunteers, expand our services to more patients, buy necessary equipment for increased services, and modestly grow our paid staff from 2.85 FTEs to 4.0 FTEs. Having a few more "hands on deck" would give us the opportunity to target and increase our services where they are most needed. Understanding this, I sincerely hope the HHS Committee will support LD 47. Thank you for reading this testimony.

Leslie Nicoll
Portland Community Free Clinic

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