

March 23, 2021

Good morning, Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Saige Purser I am a citizen of the Yakama Nation and I live in Milford, Maine. I am giving testimony today in support of LD 343 an act to set aside funds from Federal Block Grants for certain communities. This act would set aside 12% of funds from federal block grants received by the Maine Department of Health and Human services to the federally recognized tribal nations.

I am here today in my personal capacity; however, I would like to tell you what I do for work. I am the Youth Engagement Division Manager at Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness - the 9th public health district and the public health entity for the Tribal Nations. Our youth work is centered on youth leadership and positive youth development. We have worked closely with the tribal youth from the 5 tribal communities to develop youth councils in each community, promoting youth leadership and healthy behaviors. These youth councils identify community priorities or challenges and develop strategies to address these priorities.

I would like to share with you my concerns regarding the allocation of the Maine Department of Health and Human Services federal block grant dollars and my support for LD 343. In many of the block grants received by the Maine DHHS, there are specific requirements and expectations that Tribes will be consulted and be in communication with the Department in regard to this funding. This has not been done consistently or meaningfully for decades and we must take the steps needed to ensure a meaningful relationship between the Tribes, their public health district, and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

While working with the youth councils, youth have identified struggles in their communities related to lack of activities for youth, substance misuse, suicide, and the need for more cultural activities. Our youth programs are limited in capacity in both staff and financial resources. Our youth struggle disproportionately with poverty, lack of access to programs, behavioral health; and many of our youth, more than 50%, do not obtain their high school diploma.

As a public health prevention professional, I know how important it is for youth to feel heard and to have opportunities to gather in a safe space with positive role models, as well as to learn and participate in their culture. Strengthening their cultural identity builds protective factors for prevention. I support this bill as it will help in securing funding for youth and prevention programs and will build our public health infrastructure as it is an important component to this work. Securing funding is how we make this work sustainable and allows us to address persistent educational and health disparities in our local tribal communities.

We are proud of our youth, their leadership, and their developing voices for change. Thank you for your time today, and again I ask you to respect the government-to-government relationship between the State of Maine and the Tribal nations and support LD 343, it is desperately needed to keep our tribal citizens well.

Ee ou (Thank you),

Saige Purser  
Yakama Citizen  
Milford, Maine

