

Testimony on
L.D. 343, “*An Act to Set Aside Funds from Federal Block Grants for Certain Communities*”

Health and Human Services Committee
Wednesday, March 24, 2021

Good morning, Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on the Health and Human Services. My name is Lisa Sockabasin and I am a citizen of the Passamaquoddy Tribe. I am here today as a member of the public supporting L.D. 343 An Act to Set Aside Funds from Federal Block Grants for Certain Communities. I currently work in the public health field, and I come here today with former experience working in state government, within the Department of Health and Human Services. While working within the Department, I directed the Office of Health Equity (formerly the Office of Minority Health) within the Maine CDC; where the Preventative Health and Health Services Block grant was managed.

The block grants managed by the Maine CDC make a significant impact on the state public health infrastructure and also offers funding for initiatives of statewide concern. The block grants often have advisory committees comprised of experts in a variety of fields, these committees often have the role of offering advice to the State entity and can help shape funding priorities. The committees and the programs making decisions on funding priorities often lack in diversity, and almost always lack in tribal citizenship. This is problematic. We need these voices at the table. In my time in state government, I often heard misunderstandings about tribal people and their need for services. I also heard stereotypes perpetuated regularly, making it difficult to advocate fully for tribal participation in state wide efforts and funding opportunities. In managing a block grant within state government, I know that many block grants, if not all of them, have language such as, or very similar to, “Lead agencies (Maine Department of Health and Human Services) must consult with the following: (3) Indian tribe(s) or tribal organization(s) within the state. This consultation should be done in a timely manner and at the option of the Indian tribe(s) or tribal organization(s).” Additionally, some (if not all) block grants require the state agency to report on how they are including Tribes in their processes and programs. In reading some of these reports in preparation for today, the state response is weak at best, often grouping the Tribes in categories including homeless, and people with addiction disorders. While we are sensitive to the needs of other vulnerable communities; grouping Indigenous sovereign nations with others in this way, instead of respecting and acknowledging the government to government relationship, is deeply problematic.

I ask for your support to move forward with L.D. 343 as amended by Representative Talbot-Ross today. The block grants are intended to include and support tribal nations as well as many other vulnerable communities. Due to the unique relationship our Tribes have with both the state and federal government, I hope you will support moving forward

in developing a mechanism to create set aside funding for the Tribes in each block grant DHHS receives, and where the federal funder/partner allows. I also urge the Department to consider examining their processes related to every block grant received, examine critically for diversity, power, and those with lived experience, not only educational. These voices at the table matter.

Distinguished members of this committee, thank you for your time and I hope you join many of us in this room and support long overdue legislation, please support L.D. 343.

In partnership and with gratitude,

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