

Testimony of the Maine Oral Health Coalition in Support of LD 979,  
An Act To Expand Maine's School-based Health Centers  
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Committee - 2021*

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The Maine Oral Health Coalition represents a statewide group of organizations and individuals who work together as a network to support each other in raising awareness and promoting oral health and dental disease prevention activities, through community education and advocacy, with the vision that oral health is valued as a vital element of wellness for all Maine residents.

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, this testimony is to offer the support of the Maine Oral Health Coalition for LD 979. We regret that we are not able to present it in person.

Two years ago, a similar proposal passed out of this committee with a strong bipartisan vote. As she worked to reintroduce it as LD 979, Rep. Sachs also worked with staff of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial Indigenous and Maine Tribal populations to add language to address structural inequities in healthcare. Such inequities are also a significant factor in access to oral health care, leaving many Mainers, including too many school-aged children and adolescents, without the care they need.

School-based health centers (SBHCs) are important assets for schools in their mission to educate our children. Children cannot learn well if they are ill, if they are distracted because of emotional concerns, or if they are in pain. A health center at a school can facilitate timely attention to all health needs and means that students don't need to leave school to obtain care, which in rural areas can be particularly significant in terms of time lost for them from school and their parents from work. SBHCs bring health care to where students already spend most of their time: in school. Many SBHCs function as partnerships between schools and community health organizations, and so are tuned in to the needs and resources of their communities. Maine's SBHCs have a long and positive history of making a difference in students' lives. There should be more of them in our state.

We know that oral health is consequential: it is a critical factor in overall health. Oral health care services are important for all; preventive care and appropriate, timely treatment provide opportunities not only for education on good oral health habits and but also for early intervention to address oral issues before they become emergencies. Some of Maine's SBHCs have been able to provide oral health services, either directly or by collaborating with community organizations and other providers. Kids who need dental care don't do as well in school as those who receive care – it's that simple. For many children and adolescents, access to timely dental care has been challenging, for reasons that include insurance coverage, cost of care, and the distribution of our oral health providers throughout the state. Our experience this past year with COVID-19 has shown us how vulnerable our systems are, but also how resilient. SBHCs have been and must be an integral part of the health care delivery system.

The MOHC supports the inclusion of dental care services in all SBHCs; that may not be practical, but when it comes time to outline contracts and services using public funds, we support including dental care as a recommended service. That would be a key to opening a door to better oral health, better overall health, and better performance in school.

Thank you for your consideration, and we would be happy answer any questions you might have. and to participate in the work session.

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