



April 14, 2021

Testimony of Julia Brown, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project, In Support of LD 718, An Act To Improve the Health of Maine Residents by Closing Coverage Gaps in the MaineCare Program and the Children's Health Insurance Program

Good morning, Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 718.

My name is Julia Brown, and I am the Advocacy and Outreach Director at the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP). ILAP is Maine's only statewide nonprofit provider of immigration law and related legal aid to Maine's low-income residents. On behalf of ILAP and our clients, I ask the Committee to support LD 718, otherwise known as An Act To Improve the Health of Maine Residents by Closing Coverage Gaps in the MaineCare Program and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

In 1996, the United States Congress eliminated access to Medicaid and other federal safety net benefits for most immigrants as a part of so-called "welfare reform." Maine's response to this punitive federal change was to step in and cover at the state level those noncitizens who had been cut off from federal programs. It was not until 2011 that Maine took away MaineCare from most noncitizen Mainers, and today is your opportunity to right that wrong.

It is imperative that Maine once again include all noncitizens in MaineCare. Noncitizens come to Maine and participate in the full range of Maine life, including paying taxes, and should be treated like other Mainers. Moreover, noncitizen adults often have U.S. citizen children who would benefit from their parents receiving healthcare. Denying many noncitizens healthcare is to abandon them for no reason other than their immigration status. Every child deserves to have healthy parents.

Currently, families fleeing persecution and seeking asylum, green card holders who have held their green cards for less than five years, community members without immigration status, and some survivors of serious crimes, among many others, are ineligible for MaineCare. Asylum seekers cannot legally work until sometimes years after arriving to this country, or perhaps *never* under a new rule implemented last year, but still have no way of accessing healthcare despite having no income. Or think about a permanent resident who has had their green card and has been working and paying taxes for four years, who still is not eligible for MaineCare.

We often see the harmful effects of our clients not being eligible for MaineCare simply because of their immigration status. Many clients who have never had access to preventative care or screenings only access healthcare when they have a serious medical emergency and end up in the emergency room. This medical emergency and hospital visit severely disrupts their life and may have been prevented with regular medical care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted racial disparities in Maine.¹ Researchers estimate that one out of three US COVID-19 deaths and forty percent of US COVID-19 infections are linked to lack of insurance.² Restoring access to healthcare for all noncitizens is a racial justice issue.

MaineCare saves lives and helps families stay healthy. We are all in this together. ILAP implores you to reverse the 2011 discriminatory decision and restore MaineCare to our noncitizen neighbors, friends, and community members.

¹ Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition, *COVID-19 Racial and Ethnic Disparities*, available at <https://maineimmigrantrights.org/covid-19-racial-and-ethnic-disparities/>.

² Families USA, *The Catastrophic Cost of Uninsurance: COVID-19 Cases and Deaths Closely Tied to America's Health Coverage Gaps*, Mar. 2021, available at https://familiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/COV-2021-64_Loss-of-Lives-Report.pdf.