

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

LD 718 – Ought To Pass

**An Act To Improve the Health of Maine Residents
by Closing Coverage Gaps in the MaineCare Program
and the Children's Health Insurance Program**

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

April 15, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am Policy Counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, I submit this testimony in favor of LD 718. This bill would restore Maine's long-standing status as a welcoming state that respects the rights of all who live in its borders.

Immigrants come to the United States to work, to join close family members, and to escape persecution in their home countries, not to obtain government benefits. Nevertheless, because of persistent myths concerning non-citizens' supposed greater use of benefits, punitive restrictions were enacted in 1996 that exclude both legal and undocumented immigrants from a host of federal benefits.¹ These restrictions have resulted in severe hardship to both citizens and immigrants in many new American communities.

Instead of letting their neighbors suffer without healthcare, a bipartisan group of Maine lawmakers immediately passed legislation to ensure that noncitizens are eligible for MaineCare despite the federal law change. Ten years ago, the previous administration reversed this decision, stripping healthcare from scores of families in Maine, or about 500 people.

When some people lack healthcare, everyone pays. Untreated illnesses create more emergency room visits, resulting in healthcare costs that are extremely high compared to the costs of prevention or early treatment. These costs are often borne by the taxpayer or passed onto other healthcare consumers. Moreover, immigrants sustain some of Maine's most vital industries; last summer's astronomical racial

¹ See The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105 (codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1611(a))

disparities in COVID-19 infection rates arose partly from the fact that so many immigrants in Maine are essential workers.

If passed, this bill would restore MaineCare and Children's Health Insurance Program to low-income immigrant families. Supporting this bill would create a rising tide that will lift all boats. The relationship between the health of non-citizens and the health of citizens is not zero-sum; the health of one group actually improves the health of the other. Please do the right thing and vote *ought to pass*.

Thank you for your time and attention.