

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: my name is Blanca Santiago, I have lived in Portland since 1987, and I am here today to testify in favor of LD 718.

For decades, I have been watching the city of Portland grow and become one of the most racially and culturally diverse places to live and work. I have also watched as we have gained capable, competent new Mainers who work at jobs that jeopardize their very existence while exploiting their labor. Many of our community members work 2 and 3 jobs just to keep the lights on. Because of this people don't have health insurance but yet may not qualify for MeCare or Free Care.

Often the long work hours and lack of affordable healthcare competes with their ability to house, feed and care for their families. This results in a population that is dependent on emergency room care and has resulted in undiagnosed and untreated health conditions that eventually keep them from meeting their basic needs.

The ones that are the most vulnerable in these situations are children. In my role as social worker for the Portland Public Schools Multilingual and Multicultural Center, I have witnessed first hand the devastating reality parents face in not being able to afford to care for their own health. One man I will call Juan had come here as an asylee with 2 elementary school age children; a single parent, it was only through our intervention that his late stage cancer was discovered. Fortunately a school social worker and a Portuguese speaking social work intern noticed that the children were suffering emotionally and academically because of their father's undiagnosed medical condition. How very sad this story must sound to all of you. We would do anything for our children but do you think we should have to face illness and death. Children should not have to do without a parent and end up in the foster care system because somehow we can't figure out how to provide the most basic of human rights: healthcare.

The pandemic has not helped this situation. Our community's rate of infection is disproportionate. Black and brown communities are the hardest hit when it comes to Covid infection. Mothers and fathers sometimes feel forced to work while sick in order to meet basic needs. High school age students turn to shrinking work opportunities in order to stay in the family's apartment. Shelter, food, healthcare. It's not unreasonable to ask that you understand EVERYONE NEEDS THESE THREE THINGS TO LIVE. Shelter, food, healthcare.

Our household is privileged. Both of us have Medicare and enjoy good medical and dental health. But our housemate is a trans man from Central America who incurred a \$3,000 bill that he cannot afford to pay due to not being able to take regular employment until he receives his work visa. Attempts to get medical care have been held up because DHHS still has not processed his application. It's been since September. Over 6 months and all he needs is a denial letter so that he can qualify for free care at Greater Portland Health Center. It's been a rude awakening for a person who believed that all of the challenges he faced in his own country would not be a problem for him here in the United States.

I am urging you to support this bill, because healthcare is a human right. Support this bill so that no father should have to deprive himself and his children of an early diagnosis. Support this bill because we want to be better than this thing we are doing now. Because you believe that shelter, food and healthcare are basic human rights. Because everyone is worthy of basic human dignity. It's the right thing to do. Maine, the way life **should** be.

Thank you.