



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION  
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: Maine Relay 711

## **Rachel Talbot Ross**

39 Washburn Avenue  
Portland, ME 04101

[Rachel.TalbotRoss@legislature.maine.gov](mailto:Rachel.TalbotRoss@legislature.maine.gov)

April 15, 2021

*Testimony of Rep. Rachel Talbot Ross sponsoring*

## **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**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross, and I represent House District 40, which comprises the Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale, and the University of Southern Maine campus.

Thank you for the opportunity to present **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**, to you this morning. This bill provides a critical opportunity to close gaps in our health care system by ensuring all low-income Mainers have access to MaineCare regardless of their immigration status.

This much-needed legislation is straightforward. Any Maine resident who is income eligible for MaineCare but not allowed to enroll in Medicaid due to federal restrictions for certain immigrants would be eligible for our state MaineCare program.

Before I get into more of the details of who would be impacted by this legislation and other details about how it would work, I want to say a little about why it's so important. The bill title says we are seeking to close gaps in coverage, but it could more accurately say we seek to close gaping holes given the racial ethnic disparities in health that Black and Brown Mainers have experienced since we first started capturing data about disparities – and that we most recently saw as the state with the worst disparities in our nation for COVID-19.

Those disparities did not only harm immigrants, but all Mainers of color, including indigenous African Americans and members of Maine's Tribal nations, and there are many systemic challenges that contribute to those disparities. But we cannot ignore the fact that people without access to health care, like immigrants who are currently excluded from MaineCare, are more

vulnerable to COVID-19 and any other illness. Lack of preventive care and care for chronic conditions like asthma, cardiac and lung diseases, and diabetes makes people more susceptible to the virus and more likely to suffer more serious illness from the virus with more complications.

The disregard for the health of so many immigrants in Maine is even more troubling when we consider that immigrants are often working in essential jobs in vital industries. Our immigrant neighbors are critical to every facet of our food systems, from growing to processing agricultural products and seafood to working in our grocery stores and restaurants. They are working throughout our tourism and hospitality industry, a critical sector of Maine's economy. And they are filling essential jobs in every part of our health care sector, especially providing care to older Mainers and people with disabilities.

Immigrants contributed \$62 million in state and local taxes in 2016. On average, immigrants who come to Maine are more likely to have advanced education and start businesses in Maine, creating or helping to retain thousands of jobs.

Maine immigrants are leaders in our communities, they are learners in our schools, they are members of our congregations, and they are our family, friends, and neighbors. They are an integral part of our lives and our state. And, like all other Mainers, they need and deserve health care.

Federal restrictions in Medicaid were instituted in the mid-nineties. Here in Maine, our Legislature voted with bipartisan support to continue providing MaineCare for income-eligible immigrants. Then, in stark contrast to that longstanding practice, that eligibility was cut for many immigrants at the start of the LePage administration in 2011.

That harmful decision impacts Mainer immigrants of all ages in towns and cities across our state. Some examples of the people who are impacted include those who are Lawful Permanent Residents who have had their green card for less than five years, most asylum seekers, people who are caught up in data errors in the federal SAVE system, and yes, people who are here without documentation. I want to emphasize that every Maine resident needs and deserves health care. Immigrants across every type of status are vital members of our schools, churches, workforces and community organizations. Their health affects our collective public health. We must close these holes in our health care safety net.

LD 718 would use state funds to cover the care for immigrants who are not eligible for federal Medicaid or CHIP. Some care would be eligible for a federal match, such as emergency care or by using the state option to cover pregnant people through CHIP. The bill also directs the state to take advantage of any future opportunities to utilize a waiver or state option to seek federal funds for some or all of the coverage provided by this bill.

We don't have a fiscal note yet, but based on a previous bill that would have provided much of the same coverage as well as other data, advocates estimate that the cost would be between \$5 million and \$7 million annually. That is a relatively small price to invest in the health and wellbeing of Mainers.

You'll hear from others today who will give you a more complete picture of the importance of this legislation. I ask that you listen to their words with an open mind and heart. LD 718 would help Maine take a huge step forward in ensuring all Mainers have access to health care and in reducing damaging health disparities experienced by people across our state.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have – and there others who will testify after me who will be able to provide more details.