

April 14, 2021

RE: LD 718

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

I write to urge you to support LD 718 because it will benefit individuals and families who need it and it will benefit the State of Maine. Restoring eligibility for health care in Maine that was ended in 2011 is the right and the smart thing to do.

Although I am not an asylum seeker myself, over the past couple years, I have become substantially involved in various volunteer endeavors to help asylum seekers find safety and stability here. So I know many of them and know their stories. One of the things that most impresses me is the enormous amount of stress these people carry with them. It originated with the traumas they fled but is compounded by the precariousness of their lives here and the difficulties of making their way in a totally new environment, usually with a new language, and learning how to do everything all over again. Their resilience never ceases to amaze me, but the struggles are constant, and sometimes it seems like it is all too much to bear, and if we could just make one or two of their worries go away, it would at least give them some breathing room to manage the others with more ease and to find their footing.

Health needs are among the most stress-inducing because they can be life-or-death or affect quality of life significantly. Most of the families I have gotten to know consist of young adults and their young children, so they are not likely to have major health problems the way older people would. But when they do have problems (several I know got COVID, and one was hospitalized), these instances cause enormous additional stress on them and on the entire family. The issue is not just how to recover wages lost from not working during that time, but how to pay treatment bills. In my volunteer circles, I know of one woman whose teeth were falling out due to gum disease brought on by months in detention centers being unable to eat due to the stress and a child who needed eye surgery. It takes volunteers untold numbers of hours trying to find help from centers or individual practitioners willing to volunteer their time for these procedures, and often we can't find anyone. The stress of suffering health problems on top of the PTSD and nightmares from everything they fled, and especially of parents seeing their children suffer, can be the last straw that knocks them off a path toward acclimation and thriving. This will probably have long-term repercussions as these people have less and less psychological energy to meet the next challenges.

Not having access to health care also sends a strong signal to them that they do not belong and are not welcome. This is exactly the wrong signal to send when Maine desperately NEEDS immigrants to come here and to stay here, in order to maintain and hopefully grow our population. In fact, if Maine had a humane and inclusive approach to health care for immigrants, it could help us to entice more to come here. Then we could benefit from their presence -- and of course their taxes, the businesses they would start (immigrants start businesses at twice the rate of native-born Americans), and their labor.

Immigrants among us are often in essential jobs that benefit the rest of us but do not offer employer-provided health insurance. They pay state and local taxes (\$62 million in 2016, for example). They should have the right to basic services that help them to thrive.

As you know, Maine traditionally extended MaineCare benefits to immigrants whose income qualified them. This bill would restore benefits that were ended just a decade ago. It's time, and it's the right thing to do.

So please vote "ought to pass" on LD 718.

Anne Marie Wolf

Farmington