

**Testimony for LD 1501**  
**An Act to Protect Oral Health for Children in Maine**

Barbara Covey MD

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Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Barbara Covey, I live in Oakland Maine, and I am here today to testify in favor of LD 1501.

I am a physician who worked in primary care Internal Medicine for twelve years, where I learned the importance and efficacy of preventive health care. I also worked 29 years as an Emergency Department physician where I witnessed all too vividly what happens when access to preventive services is limited.

Dental disease, the most common chronic childhood disease, is a preventable illness. Knowing this, it has been deeply disturbing to see children in the Emergency Department with active dental disease. I have treated children as young as 4-5 years old with painful dental abscesses, seen children who have become aware of the societal stigma of dental disease holding their hands over their mouths while speaking to cover their decayed teeth, and searched for treatment programs for opioid dependent teens whose first introduction to opioids was for painful dental disease.

I am one of the founders and a 21-year board member of Waterville Community Dental Center, a nonprofit safety net dental center serving central Maine and currently delivering oral health services to over 5,000 community members, 70% of whom are children. But, even working to full capacity, our dental center cannot in isolation provide the solution to our community's oral health challenges.

Over 40% of children insured with MaineCare and 30% of children with commercial insurance did not receive preventive oral health services in the last year (and I can only assume that among children without dental coverage it's worse). School based care offers a community-centered means of providing consistent preventive oral health services that can reduce the burden of dental illness in Maine's children. Unfortunately, more than 400 of Maine's over 600 schools are currently not served by Maine CDC's School Oral Health Program. Also, Maine's ability to address oral health challenges has been weakened by reduced funding for public health and loss of staff positions in DHHS.

The passage of LD 1501 will extend the School Oral Health Program to offer core preventive services for all schools. The bill also provides funding for an Oral Health Coordinator in the Department of Health and Human Services to lead the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention's public health functions related to oral health. It takes a team to provide optimal health care of any sort and, as we have seen most recently with the COVID pandemic, public health leadership is essential for health care teams to be able to serve our whole population.

I urge you to approve LD 1501 to provide Maine with the basic resources and tools needed to protect our children's oral health.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you might have now or in the future.