

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Testimony in Support of:

**LD 1573: An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues**

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Elisa Curtis and I am a resident of Lincoln. While I am currently the manager of care services at Maine Home Care based out of Lincoln, I started my home care path as a PSS/CNA over 20 years ago. I am here to testify in strong support of LD 1573 presented today by Representative Fay.

I am proud of the home care career I have chosen and know that my work, as well as care provided by other essential workers around the state, makes a tremendous difference to our aging adults and disabled population. Without dedicated and compassionate home care workers many of these individuals requiring care would be forced to leave the security of their homes and moved into facilities where their compromised lives will be changed even more drastically.

I would love to be able to say that this profession (my calling) has provided me with all that I needed in return---but that has not always been the case. As a divorced mother of three, the money I made as a PSS/CNA simply did not make ends meet. Even with side jobs (on top of working my 40 hours a week) I struggled each month to keep the lights on and food on the table for my family. I consider myself frugal and know how to manage a budget, but when there isn't enough money coming in to cover even basic needs (food, clothing, electricity, rent) you need to make critical decisions on which bills will be paid (and not paid) month to month.

My children were only able to get the basic necessities and when clothing wore out, I could not afford to replace those items immediately. Even a splurge at McDonalds was often not an option for my kids. This, not even being able to get items of the dollar menu for my kids, was heart-wrenching.

An acquaintance once suggested that I should lower my hours and apply for state programs in order to make ends meet. I was raised to work hard and not rely on state programs so I had to make the tough choice to leave Maine and the job I loved.

I moved in with my parents out of state and found a home care job paying \$5 more an hour than I was previously making in Maine. With the increased salary, I was able to get some financial traction and start the long road of digging myself out of debt and finally regain financial independence. It was a great relief--and I was able to afford an apartment suitable for me and my children.

After two years of hard work, scrimping and saving, I was able to move back to Maine and return to the town that I loved. I am thankful to have been able to stay in the home care field by landing a management position at Maine Home Care which is rewarding and fulfilling.

But I'll never forget where I started. My heart goes out to PSSs across Maine who are realizing the same devastating financial fate I met years ago. The job of a personal support specialist is not easy. On top of the physical and mental demands of caring for aging clients, hours can be quite unpredictable. It is not a traditional 9-5 job by any stretch of the imagination. Our caregivers do a few hours with one client, then a few with another client, and on to another until their day is done. Signing into and out of shifts can be frustrating due to technical issues and cell reception. Getting to and from client's homes during inclement weather can often be tricky and can lead to costly car repairs as road conditions can deteriorate quickly. Clients cancel shifts without much notice, may go into the hospital, may be placed into a facility, or pass away without notice which can have a drastic effect on a caregiver's weekly paycheck which they depend on to provide for their own family.

The Home Care & Hospice Alliance of Maine has long advocated for increased compensation for this essential pool of workers that would better reflect the valuable service they provide to the patient and their families. We appreciate Representative Fay for hearing them – and us – and believe it's critical to require essential care across the long-term care continuum to be paid no less than 125% of minimum wage.

There are plenty of reasons why a caregiver would choose to seek other employment, but their hourly wage should not be one of them.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak up for this essential workforce. I'm happy to answer any questions.

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