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Testimony of Richard A. Erb, President and CEO  
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To the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Monday, May 3, 2021

In Support of L.D. 1573

An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Commission  
To Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues

Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Committee. My name is Rick Erb and I am the President and CEO of the Maine Health Care Association, representing Maine nursing homes and assisted living facilities. I am here today in support of this important legislation.

There is no question that direct care workers across the long term care continuum are critical to the health and well-being of Maine's elderly and disabled citizens. Over the years, we've referred to these employees as the lifeline, the backbone, the fabric of long term care – all of these descriptions are accurate. We are grateful for the leadership of Representative Fay and appreciate the work of all the Commission members whose varied expertise contributed to a thoughtful, comprehensive report, as well as this legislation before you today.

You've heard me say before that in my nearly 20 years of experience at MHCA, I've never seen a staffing shortage so serious and worrisome. Members consistently cite staffing as one of their biggest challenges. You've heard about the demands and rewards of these jobs. You've heard how facilities have been forced to limit admissions or rely on expensive agency staff more than they'd like. You've heard about the turnover and vacancy rates in positions that are so badly needed. In fact, we just compiled the results of our annual wage and benefit survey and members report the following:

- 60% turnover rate for CNA's
- 59% turnover rate for CRMA's
- 39% turnover rate for RN's

All of these are increases over last year's turnover rates.

While the full Commission report includes important recommendations to address these issues, we are pleased to support this bill that gets to the crux of the issue: requiring that direct care workers across the continuum be paid no less than 125% of the minimum wage. We must raise wages in order to recruit and retain direct care staff and in doing so, send the message that this work is important and valued.

MHCA has a long history of advocating for improved wages and benefits for our direct care workforce. Most of these efforts have been within the context of ensuring sufficient MaineCare reimbursement to support these goals. We are pleased to see that this bill makes the direct connection between wages and rates. Specifically, we see language in the bill that requires the department to "take into account" these wage increases and other expenses in establishing rates for long term care providers. We ask you to consider stronger language that would require the resulting rates to fully fund the mandates.

In closing, when asked what they love about working in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, our caregivers cited the following:

- It is an honor and privilege to care for our community's loved one.
- For many residents, I am the only family they have.
- I make a difference and am happy to come to work.
- In the 38 years that I have worked here, I have received so much more than I have given.

These are the people who comprise the lifeline, the backbone, the fabric of long term care in Maine. These are the people we will be helping by implementing L.D. 1573 and I ask you to vote "ought to pass." Thank you.