

**Testimony of
Donald Harden, on Behalf of Catholic Charities Maine
Regarding LD 1573; "An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Commission To
Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues."
Delivered in writing to the
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
May 3, 2021**

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

My name is Don Harden and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Catholic Charities Maine, an agency I have been affiliated with for over 41 years most recently as Director of Aging Services.

As one of Maine's largest, community-based, social service agencies we provided help and hope to 101,857 Mainer's last year. An important part of our mission is providing services to older Mainer's. This includes the Independent Support Services Program, also known as the State Homemaker Program a general funded service under Section 69. The ISS Program assists individuals *who otherwise could not live independently* with such things as housekeeping, laundry, meal preparation, grocery shopping, and transportation for errands and appointments. Last year under ISS we served 2130 consumers in homes across all 16 counties.

- ISS consumers are highly resilient and fiercely independent but need physical assist with the most basic of daily tasks.
- They are older adults with 70% over 65 at an average age of 71
- Most are on fixed incomes needing supports that will exceed their financial means.
- Many are living in stressed housing, food insecure, socially isolated, 56% live alone, with inadequate supports, something that has magnified under COVID as access to family and community members has become more challenging.
- Most have complex medical issues with problems accessing physician care often dependent on local public safety and emergency response.

During 2019, I served on the Commission to Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues representing homemaker service providers. I am testifying in favor of LD 1573.

At that time our report detailed unstaffed hours and waitlists for services and the demographics of a rapidly aging state, predicting that the mismatch between services needed and workers available will only become more acute. It has gotten more acute. We currently have 1,114 people on our ISS Homemaker wait list, and 240 consumers on our unstaffed list, because we can't hire enough staff.

As an employer we have taken extraordinary steps to try to keep up with the external forces making it difficult to compete for workforce within the limits of current reimbursement. We have implemented incentives to try to retain our current workers and have expanded utilization of the self-direct care option to involve consumers in recruiting their own worker. We are already

paying beyond minimum wage and are still not competitively positioned in most areas of the state to ensure adequate workforce.

To be clear, Maine's direct care workers, are essential care workers, assisting Maine's people with some of most important tasks of daily life. We learned that full well in the early days of the Pandemic. As much of the world went off-line and out of sight, our homecare workers with compassion and courage continued to go into people's homes and could be seen out in the community ensuring that essential services continued to be met.

We have not valued our essential care workforce with job quality and competitive and livable wages, and in that not valuing we are not meeting the value of access to essential care for some of Maine's older citizens. It is only right that people as they age receive the right services at the right time in the right place.

These older citizens live in our towns, and on our islands, came home to their communities from our wars, worked in our factories, paid the taxes that built the schools, kept an eye out for neighbor's children, and through no fault of their own have found themselves near the end of their lives in needs of services and supports. There is an unspoken covenant that exists in community life that for people who have given so much, we will be there for them if and when they need us; we are not honoring that covenant when people have to wait months for services they are eligible for because of a lack of workers.

We need a vision for Maine's essential care workforce, and we need bold action to address essential workforce shortages.

LD 1573 has strategically prioritized the most important and urgent of the Commission's 29 recommendations. By establishing a base wage for essential care workers at 125% of the Minimum Wage we will take a step towards providing a competitive livable wage that will enable us to retain our veteran workers and attract new workers to join this workforce.

LD 1573 would require rates of reimbursement that would ensure that we can cover the costs of worker compensation and regulatory requirements to provide services.

LD 1573 would establish a Workforce Committee Advisory Committee that would ensure that we continually monitor and respond to issues with waitlists and worker supply.

After a decade of seeing wait lists and workforce challenges grow this is the time to make significant investments in our essential care economy. I urge passage of LD 1573.

Thank you for your consideration and your service to Maine's citizens.