

Senator Claxton Representative Meyer and Health and Human Services Committees

Support of LD1693, "An Act To Advance Health Equity, Improve the Well-being of All Maine People and Create a Health Trust"

Dear Senator Claxton and Representatives Meyer,

The American Heart Association (AHA) is the nation's oldest and largest voluntary organization dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke, whose mission is to be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives and we are supportive of **LD1693, "An Act To Advance Health Equity, Improve the Well-being of All Maine People and Create a Health Trust"**. Eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities is one of the most important steps to ensure that everyone, no matter their zip code, has an opportunity to live a longer and healthier life. **LD1963** presents an important opportunity to recognize and rebuild Maine's public health framework that have directly and indirectly contributed to health disparities in communities across the state.

The major components of the bill include tobacco, obesity, and equity policies. **LD1963** ensures full funding for the state's tobacco prevention and control program at the level recommended by the US CDC by establishing the Trust for a Healthy Maine; reducing youth tobacco use by ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products; and reducing nicotine addiction among youth, who are particularly sensitive to price, by increasing Maine's cigarette excise tax by \$2.00/pack. **LD1963** would fund a Maine CDC obesity care coordinator and obesity prevention programming, it would align early care and K-12 nutrition and physical activity standards with national standards, and it would establish an Obesity Advisory Council to support Maine CDC obesity prevention programming. Lastly **LD1963**, it would ensure that there was an annual investment in systems and infrastructure to improve health equity and allocate funding for public health districts' health improvement plans, and establishes an office of health equity, including funding for the office's director and data collection and reporting.

Tobacco use takes a devastating toll on our State – killing more than 2,400 residents every year and costing Maine more than \$811 million in health care costs – much of it borne by our residents¹. It is a problem that starts with our children because nearly 90 percent of current smokers begin when they are 18 or younger. There is a clear need to act now and protect our kids from tobacco company efforts to addict them. Over 2,900 of our kids try their first cigarette each year and one in three kids who get hooked on tobacco will die prematurely from it. It is well established that comprehensive statewide tobacco-prevention and cessation programs prompt sharp reductions in smoking levels among both adults and kids by both increasing the numbers who quit or cutback and reducing the numbers who start or relapse. Tobacco companies are spending huge sums promoting their deadly and addictive products. The state takes in \$187.9 million annually in tobacco taxes and tobacco settlement payments yet spend less than 4.5 percent of it (\$8.4 million) on programs to prevent kids from smoking and help smokers quit¹. Tobacco companies spend \$45.8 million each year on marketing and promotion, much of which influences kids to smoke. This means the tobacco companies spend

nearly \$5.5 to market their products for every \$1 the states spend to reduce tobacco use.¹ Tobacco companies use flavor to hook a new generation of kids on its deadly products. Flavors hide the bad taste of tobacco and make it easier for kids to try. Menthol has the additional quality of soothing the irritation of combustible cigarettes, which is why so many young people start smoking using menthol cigarettes. Maine has not increased its cigarette excise tax since 2005. Increasing the cigarette tax by \$2.00/pack, as proposed in this bill, would generate nearly \$48 million in new annual revenue, decrease youth smoking by nearly 20%, and generate \$3.4 million in state savings to the Medicaid program over the next five years.² Raising tobacco taxes can help reduce tobacco-related health disparities. Together, aggressive advertising by tobacco companies and uneven public health protections have meant Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous communities face more obstacles when it comes to avoiding dangerous tobacco products. Tobacco taxes are a proven way to encourage reductions in the use of products that have a disproportionately harmful impact on the health of individuals and families in these communities. We know the problem caused by tobacco and we know that a comprehensive approach to tobacco control aimed at protecting our kids from all tobacco products, eliminating all flavors, and increasing the price by raising a tax are all a critical part of the solution. These approaches will save lives and money.

All children, no matter where they live or go for childcare, deserve healthy food and time for active play. Parents support clear and consistent standards in early care and education settings for food and beverages, active play, and screen time, and providers want to offer an environment that nurtures healthy children. Early care and education standards support the needs of children, parents, and providers. Standards will ensure that all kids are, being served more fruits and vegetables and drinking water or milk instead of sugary drinks; engaging in active play for at least one hour each day; and keeping the time they spend in front of a TV, computer, or tablet limited. Kids need healthy food and beverages, by providing meals and snacks rich in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, children get the nutrients their bodies need to grow, and minds need to develop. Kids need time every day to play and be active, and active play helps children build and improve fine and gross motor skill development, coordination, balance and control, hand eye coordination, strength, dexterity, and flexibility—all of which are necessary for children to reach developmental milestones. Kids should not spend too much time in front of a screen, reducing screen time allows for more time to explore, spend time with books, engage in active play, and interact with caregivers and other children.

Health Equity is achieved when every person has the opportunity to attain his or her full health potential and no person is disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of social position or other socially determined circumstances. **LD1693** addresses health disparities or health inequities, types of unfair health differences closely linked with social, economic or environmental disadvantages that adversely affect groups of people. The aspects of this bill would look to address social determinants of health and the aspects of the environment in which people are born, grow up, live, work, and age, as well as the systems put in place to deal with illness. **LD1693** would ensure that evidence-based strategies would be used to promote

equitable social, economic, and environmental conditions to achieve optimal health, mental health, and well-being for all.

I would ask that you vote "Ought to Pass on **LD1693** and would be pleased to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Allyson Perron Drag
American Heart Association/ Stroke Association
Government Relations Director

References

1. Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/problem/toll-us/maine>
2. American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, and Tobacconomics, New Revenues, Public Health Benefits & Cost Savings from a \$2.00 Cigarette Tax Increase in Maine, January 12, 2021.