

Testimony of Paul Kuehnert regarding Maine LD 1523, An Act To Establish the Trust for a Healthy Maine

My name is Dr. Paul Kuehnert, and I am a resident of Hallowell, Maine. I am a registered nurse and have had the privilege of working in the field of public health for more than forty years. I was particularly honored to serve the people of Maine from 1999 through 2006 in the Maine CDC first as the Director of the Division of Disease Control, then as the first Director of the Office of Public Health Emergency Preparedness, and finally as the Deputy Director and Deputy State Health Officer.

I currently serve as the President and CEO of the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), the national, non-profit organization that establishes evidence-based standards for governmental public health and oversees accreditation for state, local, Tribal, territorial, and U.S. Army public health departments. While PHAB is not taking a position that is either for or against LD 1523, as a citizen of Maine who is privileged to work on public health issues across the country, I wish to provide some national context that I hope will be helpful to the Committee as it considers this bill.

As we enter the third year of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers from every state and across every level of government are grappling with questions related to what we have learned from this crisis. Most importantly, policymakers want to know what should be done to assure that our public health system is both better prepared for the next crisis and is also working effectively, day in and day out, to promote health and prevent disease arising from obesity, tobacco use, opioids, diabetes, poor mental health, climate change---the list goes on.

To address these questions, PHAB along with other national public health organizations and several national and regional foundations supported the Bipartisan Policy Center to convene a task force of current and former elected officials as well as business leaders to assess the situation and make recommendations. Their report, *Public Health Forward: Modernizing the U.S. Public Health System* (found here: <https://bit.ly/3uprULx>) was issued in December 2021. This bipartisan report identifies a set of action recommendations in six areas—financing, workforce, laws and governance, community engagement, partnerships, and data and IT infrastructure—that policymakers should prioritize and put in place over the next five years to position public health to meet current and future challenges most effectively.

As is well documented in *Public Health Forward* and other recent reports such as the Trust For America's Health report, *The Impact of Chronic Underfunding on America's Public Health System: Trends, Risks, and Recommendations, 2021*, (found here: <https://bit.ly/3LaGP2r>) public health departments have been hollowed out through long-term underfunding that is periodically interrupted with an influx of emergency funds in response to a crisis. This "boom/bust cycle" of funding undermines public health's ability to have real and sustained impact on the health and well-being of the residents they serve.

Core to the bipartisan *Public Health Forward* action recommendations is this vision statement regarding financing for public health:

“Vision: Sufficient, predictable, and flexible funding supports the public health system and enables it to sustain healthy communities across the country and act quickly to protect the public from expected and unexpected health issues. All public health departments need the resources, support, and skills to provide core programs, address challenges unique to their jurisdictions, and meet national public health practice standards.” *Public Health Forward*, pg 8.

In closing, as you grapple with the issues of building and sustaining a robust and resilient public health infrastructure to serve the people of Maine, it is important to remember that you are not alone. Already, Maine CDC is part of our community of nationally accredited public health departments. In addition, right now PHAB’s Public Health National Center for Innovation is expanding its 21st Century Public Health Learning Community (more information here: <https://bit.ly/35OIGcX>) from its current 11 states to 25-28 states. We are accepting applications right now and we hope that Maine will join the learning community. There Maine can share what it is learning in its journey to modernize and sustain its public health system and learn from other states, particularly those that have established new state funding to address public health infrastructure in new and innovative ways.

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