

Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH
Freeport, Maine

IN SUPPORT OF LD 1693

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

Presented by **Representative Rachel Talbot Ross**

Before the Health and Human Services Committee: February 4, 2022

Good Morning, Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committee. My name is Lani Graham. I am a retired family practice physician and former Chief Public Health officer for Maine. Currently I serve on the Public Health Committee for the Maine Medical Association (MMA) and live in Freeport. I am here in support of LD 1693.

I have been involved in public health in Maine for more than 25 years, but over the years I have been discouraged by the difficulty in maintaining consistent funding for public health and particularly for the great epidemic of tobacco addiction. In 2020 the leading killer in Maine was not Covid, but heart disease, followed by cancer, both strongly linked to tobacco use.

We all celebrated when at last the tobacco companies were held accountable for knowingly addicting thousands of Maine people to this dangerous product, and through multi-state litigation, Maine became one of the beneficiaries of the Tobacco Settlement dollars. At the time, the Maine legislature sensibly set up a special receptacle, the Fund for Healthy Maine. It was a great idea and worked well. In fact, the Fund for Healthy Maine made most of our best advances in tobacco prevention and control possible and Maine a leader in tobacco control.

Yet over the years, bit by bit, those dollars have increasingly gone to sick care, rather than prevention. While this “robbing of Peter to pay Paul” is totally understandable, we are now at a crossroads. Careful analysis has shown that if we do nothing, very soon the tobacco

program will be “on the ropes”. The larger public health community has worked hard to get ahead of this “crash” and create a solution that will be protective of public health dollars, be well connected to the work of the Maine Centers for Disease Control and engage some real leaders in public health to be part of the effort. That solution is embodied in this bill as the Trust.

As a physician previously in the position now occupied by Dr. Shah, I can say that it would have meant a lot to have a group of totally committed public health leaders, such as those described in this bill, to work with on important public health issues. They will bring public health expertise as well as deep knowledge of public health needs across the state, and the Centers for Disease Control Director will provide the overview of available resources and current projects. They will team up to protect public health dollars and put resources where they are needed most.

Now is the time to act to create a professional plan that will fully fund the tobacco control program in Maine, align with the work of the Maine Centers for Disease Control and move Maine people toward a healthier future. No idea is perfect and this one will have its detractors. But it seems more than worth a try. If not this plan, worked on for years, what is better?

Though LD 1693 is chock full of good ideas, I only have time to mention one more that is of particular interest to me, the proposed ban on flavored tobacco products. I testified at length on LD 1550, submitted testimony for the Portland ban and will speak at the town of Brunswick’s consideration of it. With flavored products the industry can lure in the very best customers, youth, and create a strong addiction before someone is even out of high school. A recent report of the American Lung Association gave Maine’s high school smoking rate at a shocking 33%. For the health of Maine’s next generation, the invention of flavored tobacco products has been a public health disaster and must be out of Maine now. Please keep that piece in the bill.

Thank you for your attention

