

LD 1693: An Act To Advance Health Equity, Improve the Wellbeing of All Maine People and Create a Health Trust

Sponsored - by Rep. Rachel Talbot Ross

From – Christine Lyman, MSW, retired public health professional

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I respectfully encourage all members of the Health and Human Services Committee to look at the context of your upcoming work regarding the Trust proposed in LD 1693. This bill offers an opportunity for the Health and Human Services Committee to help strengthen Maine's public health system infrastructure and specific priority goals. The idea for the Trust comes from good faith efforts of nonprofit public health partners, allies and stakeholders who want to mitigate likely damage and disruption to the system and the workforce because of a structural fiscal deficit.

The underlying question behind the bill is this - if this bill does not receive support after the work session has tweaked concepts and text - who decides what happens next, who's at the table to plan for the structural problem issue that remains, when will it get addressed, and who will know about it. Who is accountable for public health system planning and who shares in that accountability.

Now retired, I worked in the Maine CDC for over 17 years in helping to build capacity for community coalitions, regional public health districts, and in health equity. During this time two major policy opportunities for fairness and prevention planning resulting in statutory policy took place that illustrates Maine's values of fairness and inclusion.

[1a] in the early 90s the State decided to use funding from to the sale of the state Blue Cross/Blue Shield for a conversion foundation dedicated entirely to improving access to healthcare. This resulted in the Maine Health Access Foundation [MEHAF].

[1b] around the same time the Fund for a Healthy Maine was established and dedicated to prevention of chronic diseases with a primary focus on tobacco. This resulted in state cross agency and cross program coordination and collaboration with the establishment of community-based community health infrastructure.

[2] In the last decade, the Governor's Office of Health Policy and Finance [GOPHF] was established. One outcome was a collaboration with the Maine CDC for a planning process called the Public Health Workgroup [PHWG] that produced policy recommendations to institutionalize public health system infrastructure assets. The process was transparent and accountable; its statutes remain in place [infrastructure](#).

Over time, more and more funding was carved out for medical care, and a hiatus occurred in the understanding of public health and its workforce, and its impact on population health and the economy.

At the national level, the Covid pandemic revealed underfunding of public health systems, so a national call has been made to strengthen and improve public health systems, workforce and capacity. Nationally public health improvement trends are urging multi-sector partnerships, health equity, shared governance, and a reminder that public health work is operationalized at the local community level.

How much LD 1693 must be tweaked to meet the challenges and technical/fiscal issues will emerge. But public health outcomes depend on more than medical care delivery. At present the process for public health infrastructure planning in Maine seems murky. It is unclear who is being engaged in multi-year planning, especially as it relates to partnerships, data, the state health plan and sustainability. We need the HHS committee to help us strengthen the bones of our public health system. There might be some great ideas percolating out there, but who knows about them.

No matter what your current views are of this bill, I urge you to seize the opportunity to make a strong statement on behalf of the present and future public health workforce. We need a transparent process for how the state will address public health improvement planning that puts health equity at the center. Every Mainer everywhere deserves to receive the essential public health services. Support this bill and don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.