



Maine Health Care Association

**TESTIMONY OF Richard A. Erb
President and CEO
Maine Health Care Association**

February 9, 2021

To the Joint Standing Committee
on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business

In Support of L.D. 119

***An Act to Increase Faculty in Nursing Education Programs by Amending the
Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program***

Good morning, Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and members of the Committee. My name is Rick Erb and I am the President and CEO of the Maine Health Care Association. Our organization represents nursing homes and assisted living facilities. I testify today in support of L.D. 119.

Maine's well-documented nursing shortage continues to be a problem across all health care settings including long term care. Nurses have been a critical part of the COVID-19 response in long term care facilities. We have seen firsthand their dedication, the challenges, and the overwhelmingly positive impact that nurses have had in combatting the pandemic. But Maine had a nursing crisis before COVID-19 and as a State, we need to take steps to address it by supporting programs such as this one before you today. In long term care, COVID-19 only

exacerbated existing staffing challenges. MHCA has and will support efforts to improve and advance workforce development. While we are currently collecting the data for 2020, MHCA's 2019 Wage and Fringe Study showed 56 RN vacancies across 84 facilities at a snapshot in time. We expect the vacancy rate to be even higher for 2020, as most of last year was spent fighting a pandemic.

This bill proposes to increase the amount eligible for repayment under this program for a master's and doctoral degree to reflect the current cost of obtaining the advanced education. At the same time, it increases the student's commitment to teach in a Maine-based school of nursing to a minimum of 5 years to qualify for the loan program. We support these provisions and in fact, require a commitment to Maine long term care facilities in our own scholarship program.

As others have noted, Maine is an aging state, many nurses themselves reaching retirement age. As these nurses leave the workforce, we must do everything we can to ensure there are new nurses filling the ranks. This requires an ample supply of appropriately educated nursing faculty. This Loan Repayment Program was implemented several years ago for all the right reasons, namely to recruit and retain nursing faculty to grow the nursing workforce. Today's situation has not improved, if anything it has worsened. I hope this is the year the Legislature will be able to fund the program at the appropriate level that will support students pursuing these degrees. Incentivizing faculty to teach in Maine will help ease the nursing shortage - a welcome result for long term care. Thank you.