

**Testimony of Behalf of the University of Maine System Presented by
Kelley Strout, Ph.D., RN and Director of the University of Maine School of Nursing
In Support of LD 119, *An Act To Increase Faculty in Nursing Education Programs
by Amending the Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program*
Feb. 9, 2021**

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business (IDEA): My name is Kelley Strout and I am a proud Registered Nurse and the Director of the University of Maine School of Nursing. On behalf of Maine's public universities and their nursing programs, I am here to offer our strongest support for addressing the state's acute nursing workforce shortage by investing in nursing education and educators, as proposed by LD 119.

Maine's nursing workforce shortage, which will grow to 2,700 nurses by 2025, is widely known and has been deeply felt during the pandemic. Less understood is the pipeline problem that has led us to this cliff. Simply put, our rapidly aging state isn't producing enough new nurses to keep up with the growing patient demand, especially as more and more of these skilled healthcare professionals retire. But it's not due to a lack of Mainers who want to become nurses.

Maine's public universities are receiving a record number of applications – more than 3,100 for the current academic year – to the high-quality programs offered in-person and online through our universities in Augusta, Fort Kent, Orono and Southern Maine. That's a 16% increase in applications from just two years ago. Yet we are forced to turn away hundreds of qualified, aspiring nurses due to faculty and facility capacity constraints. At the University of Maine School of Nursing alone, 1,401 applications were received for just 80 slots in this year's incoming class.

All of our nursing programs have critical vacancies, including three unfilled full-time faculty positions at both UMaine and the University of Southern Maine and two at the University of Maine at Augusta with another anticipated in the fall due to retirement. More than one-third of nursing faculty teaching at Maine's colleges and universities are over the age of 55, further compounding the current challenge even before addressing the additional positions needed to support enrollment growth. Since I began at UMaine six years ago, 80% of the nursing faculty here have either retired or passed away. With faculty wages tens of thousands of dollars lower than those of practicing nurses, recruitment of new faculty is a constant struggle. Often we are unable to fill positions without multiple rounds of a national search.

Due to both core faculty shortages and the tremendous value practicing professionals bring to our students' learning, Maine's nursing programs rely heavily on part-time faculty – commonly referred to as adjuncts – especially to help teach our clinical and laboratory courses. Finding clinicians who are interested, available and academically qualified for these part-time positions has also long been problematic, and become even more so during the pandemic.

Registered nurses who may have an interest in transitioning to teaching despite the lower pay too often lack the educational qualifications for a nursing faculty position. Just 7% of RNs in Maine hold at least a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), the minimum degree required by national accreditation and the State's Board of Nursing to teach in a Bachelor of Science in

Nursing (BSN) degree program – even as a part-time instructor. And, it is a risk many Maine families can't afford to walk away from a stable, good-paying job to go back to school.

Despite these difficulties and our own limited financial resources, Maine's public universities are getting creative and collaborating in new ways to meet the state's need for nurses and the faculty who will train them to compassionately care for you and your loved ones.

We're expanding affordable online programs including the MSN in Nursing Education offered by UMaine, USM, and soon the University of Maine at Fort Kent, making it more convenient for practicing nurses to earn these in-demand degrees that will allow them to advance in the field or into a faculty position. And because national accreditation standards require faculty who teach in those MSN programs to hold a minimum of a doctoral degree in nursing, next year USM will launch a fully online Doctor of Nurse Practice program.

UMS is also bringing our nursing programs into high-need communities, and high schools. In 2018, UMFK partnered with its sister campus in Presque Isle to bring four-year nursing to central Aroostook County for the first time, also opening an accelerated program track on this campus. This fall, UMFK launched a pathway that allows students at a Houlton-based CTE center to graduate high school with the first year of the BSN program complete, an example of how UMS early college programs can help prepare future nurses. Later this year, UMA will start offering its pre-licensure BSN program at the University of Maine at Farmington, which the president of the local community health network called "a tremendous step forward for healthcare and education in Franklin County." Our universities are also working to increase the number of sites for clinical placements – which can be another pipeline pinch point, including with the Veterans Administration. And under the University of Maine System's new unified accreditation, I am co-leading the development of a Statewide Strategic Program Plan that will provide a more coordinated approach to how our distinctive programs bring our collective resources together to fully meet Maine's nursing needs.

To deliver on this plan, we need faculty.

The 122nd Maine Legislature was wise to establish the Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program to increase nursing faculty recruitment and retention. As we near the one-year anniversary of a global public health emergency and the edge of the workforce cliff, now is the time to finally fund this program and to do so at a level that actually allows nursing students to attain the requisite masters or doctoral degree and then commit to teaching in the state.

Maine's public universities urge you to join us in investing in our future nursing workforce and the health of our communities by supporting LD 119. I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and am happy to answer your questions.