

February 28, 2023

Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business
Attn: Kristen Bowker, Cross Building, Room 206

Re: Testimony in support of LD 632, An Act to Amend the Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business,

My name is Sandy Butler. I am the Director of the School of Social Work, University of Maine, and live in Orono. I am representing the University of Maine System (UMS) in support of LD 632. This testimony has been prepared in collaboration with the directors of the other two social work programs in the UMS: Dr. Beverly Wagner, Director of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program at the University of Maine at Presque Isle; and Dr. Jeanette Andonian, Associate Dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Southern Maine. I am sorry I am unable to present this testimony in person.

Last year, across our three programs we graduated 70 BSW students and 90 Masters of Social Work (MSW) students, and collectively we currently enroll 220 BSW students and 225 MSW students. We believe that LD 632 will significantly and positively affect social workers who have graduated and will continue to graduate from our programs and who represent the majority of social workers practicing in Maine. This in turn will positively impact the populations they serve and better equip Maine to respond to the severe shortage of behavioral health workers that currently exists.

From our decades of experience in teaching social work students and hearing about their experiences upon graduation as they secure employment serving some of the most vulnerable populations in our great State, we offer these important observations:

- Social work students, particularly MSW students, rarely have scholarships or grants to support their education so are generally dependent on student loans. They are frequently non-traditional students, employed—often full time—while going to school, and many are also raising families.
- These graduates begin their careers with significant student debt. A recent survey of 518 social workers in Maine, conducted by the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), found that among the 91% with student loan debt, BSW-level practitioners had an average debt of \$50,624, MSW-trained workers had an average debt of \$74,557, and social workers with doctorates had an average debt of \$117,500.
 - Admittedly, these data include individuals who attended private institutions with higher tuition rates than social work programs within

UMS. Nonetheless, the expected debt load for many UMS students can be a deterrent to pursuing the education necessary to practice social work. In 2022, at the University of Maine, 70% of all BSW graduates carried student debt, with an average debt of \$27,500. Among our MSW graduates, 94% started their post-graduate careers with student debt, averaging \$46,500.

- The salaries that social workers earn make it difficult for these compassionate and skilled workers to repay their loans while supporting themselves and their families. [Average pay](#) for MSW-trained practitioners in Maine is less than \$60,000, with BSW-trained workers earning about [\\$13,000 less](#). This relatively low compensation in the face of large student debt leads some to leave the state for higher salaries elsewhere or to leave the profession for jobs that pay more. Maine can ill afford the loss of these workers.
- Workforce shortages in behavioral health have consequences. These include, but are not limited to, long wait lists for mental health services, lengthened stays in emergency departments when no residential beds are available, and teens being placed out of state due to the dearth of such care in Maine. These compromised responses to profound health concerns impact our economy through distracted workers and productivity loss when health care needs are not met for workers or their loved ones.

LD 632 will amend the Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program, passed in 2011, but not funded to date. The bill expands the list of eligible practice areas, increases the number of loans repaid each year, and increases the amount of repayment. Enacting and funding this bill will have a significant impact for hundreds of social workers currently struggling to pay their bills while serving children, families, older adults, new Mainers, people with substance use disorders or struggling with health and mental health concerns, and many others. I urge you to vote in favor of this bill and to support its full funding. Passage and funding of this bill will allow many of our graduates to stay in Maine and to provide needed behavioral health support to some of our most vulnerable neighbors in communities throughout our State.

Respectfully submitted,



Sandra S. Butler, Ph.D.
Professor, Director and MSW Coordinator