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## Lydia V. Crafts

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Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Good Afternoon Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. I am Representative Lydia Crafts and I come before you today to testify in support of LD 632, "An Act to Amend the Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program.

This program, in its original form, provided three annual awards of \$5,000 and was never funded. Our amendment language presented today expands the program to serve 100 annual awards of \$20,000. This expansion, along with broadening the qualifying roles, is designed to help address the shortage of social workers across our state.

As any Mainer will tell you, our state is facing a labor shortage of mighty proportions. Mental health service providers are not immune. In a state with over 6,000 licensed social workers, agencies and job boards report hundreds of openings, often in some of the most critical roles working with Maine's most vulnerable residents.

Simultaneously, young people, adults, and older Mainers are struggling to manage and maintain their mental health. Recent reports indicate 1 in 3 high school females has considered suicide, our drug and alcohol related overdose fatalities continue to shatter heartbreaking records each year, and local mental health agencies report that they have thousands of Mainers on their waitlists going unserved. A family in Washington County will spend on average 435 days on a waiting list for Home and Community based mental health treatment. As families try to survive without services, as our loved ones overdose from poisonings, and as our schools and law enforcement agencies are left to pick up the pieces, we have to find practical solutions that prevent disastrous crises.

This legislation before you provides a direct avenue to recruit and retain professionals in the state of Maine. Social workers, many of whom are educated (like myself) at a Maine institution, provide the most efficient and cost effective direct services to people in their communities. Most Mainers seeking mental health support will begin in outpatient counseling or case management, the majority of both services provided by social workers. This entry point is crucial in reducing or minimizing the need for hospitalizations, law enforcement involvement, and child protective services.

Unfortunately, clinical social workers carry an average debt of \$74,000. In a field with relatively low wages compared with other healthcare professions, they have some of the highest debt to income ratios in the field. This burden weighs heavily on many individuals as they decide whether to leave the field for higher paying jobs, especially in our current labor market.

Finally, for every behavioral health bill that comes before our body, we will have to ask, "Where do we find employees to staff these life saving programs?" LD 632 sets Maine on a path to attract and retain a critical segment of our workforce. I hope you will support this effort and I'll be more than happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Lydia Crafts, LCSW  
State Representative