

Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business, attn: Committee Clerk  
c/o Legislative Information Office  
Cross Building, Room  
100 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: **LD 632: An Act to Amend the Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program**

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

My name is Alicia McConkey, I live in Bangor, and I am a master's in social work student at the University of Maine in Orono, I am also a member of NASW Maine. I am testifying in support of LD # 632: An Act to Amend the Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program and request that the program be fully funded.

My classmates and I have many conversations about how much debt we will be in when we graduate, yet we still want to learn and help. Nevertheless, the conversation always turns to the possibility of leaving Maine after graduation because of how little incentive there is to stay. Though the Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program exists, it has never been funded because my classmates and myself believe that we are not seen as being valuable by our legislative representatives. With starting salaries of only \$46,000- \$50,000 a year and no student loan forgiveness, it is a hard sell to social work students and social workers who already work in the field to stay in or to move to Maine when pay is low, and there are no educational loan repayment/reimbursement options available that focus on social workers.

The following are important points to consider:

- On June 22, 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division found that Maine violated and has no clear plan to end its violation of title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, as it has failed *“to provide behavioral health services to children in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs. Instead, the State unnecessarily relies on segregated settings such as psychiatric hospitals and residential treatment facilities, to provide these services;”* (U.S.D.O.J, 2022). The Report goes on to state that one of the ways to fix this violation is to allocate resources to maintain a sufficiently trained pool of community providers.
- The U.S. Department of Labor puts the need for social workers nationwide at a *growth rate of 9% between 2021-2031*. Maine has a decreasing number of social workers, yet, an increasing need for social workers due to increased demand for behavioral health services.
- In a 2022 poll of *470 social workers*, *40%* have a deep concern for their student loan debt, which has them considering leaving the field or the state (NASW-Maine).

This bill has the potential to retain social work students trained in Maine, to keep social workers working in Maine from switching professions, and to entice social workers from other states to move to Maine to practice. Lowering student debt does not seem like it does a lot, but for social workers who do not make as much money as their nursing and doctor counterparts, student loan debt is an important consideration. As a student, I have worked with teenagers, many of which need clinical social workers, but most of them were on waiting lists despite major mental health diagnoses simply because there are no providers to see them. I want to be one of those providers. Yet, with my student loan debt of nearly \$80,000, I will never be able to buy a

house, I will never own a new car, and though I would like to adopt kid(s) out of the foster system, that too may be too expensive for me to do with a social workers salary and student loan debt. Help social workers help the state of Maine and its residents by lowering student debt for as much and as many social workers as can be done. We all look to social workers to fix the mental health problems of the world, but no one has been willing to put the money towards paying social workers their fair share in income and student loan repayment/forgiveness; it's time to stop forgetting social workers and show us you value the work we do by supporting this bill.

I urge you all to vote "Yes" on **LD # 632**.

Respectfully submitted,  
Alicia McConkey  
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Reference #1: U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division,  
[https://drme.org/assets/uncategorized/2022.06.22\\_maine\\_kids\\_lof.final\\_accessiblepdf\\_0.pdf](https://drme.org/assets/uncategorized/2022.06.22_maine_kids_lof.final_accessiblepdf_0.pdf)

Reference #2: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm>