

## Testimony in Support of LD 632

February 28, 2023

Chairpersons Curry and Roberts and members of the Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business Committee,

My name is Robin Russel. I have been a professor at the University of Maine School of Social Work since 2006. I teach in both our undergraduate and graduate programs. I am a resident of Hermon.

We are experiencing a mental health crisis in the state of Maine. The need for services has skyrocketed in the last few years, partially due to the impact of COVID and an accelerating opiate epidemic. Existing social service agencies cannot meet the need due to staffing shortages. Salaries for agency based mental health service providers are low, primarily due to MaineCare reimbursement rates. At the same time, social work students are graduating with large amounts of educational loan debt.

A large proportion of our students are first generation college students, and many have families who cannot afford to pay the cost of their going to school. Most work while they are in school. When they graduate, they must pay for a place to live, a vehicle, and other work-related expenses. When you add in the cost of student loan payments, there's no way they can make ends meet and afford to work in our field. I am currently teaching our entire BSW senior class, and I can tell you they are extremely stressed about how they'll be able to make enough money to pay living expenses at salaries offered to our graduates. Except for DHHS jobs in child protective services, most entry level social work jobs in Maine pay substantially less than \$40,000 a year. I have kept in touch with many of our past graduates and I find it very disappointing to see them working in food service or clerical jobs,

because they can earn more money doing that than being a social worker.

Additionally, we are getting an increasing number of undergraduate students from other states. Many want to stay in Maine and build on the professional connections they've made in their internships and jobs. However, they come from states like MA, NY, and CT that do provide loan forgiveness to social workers. It's hard for Maine to compete with those economic supports.

Our graduate students incur more than twice the loan debt as our undergraduate students. Yet, they don't make much more money when they graduate. Human service agencies who serve MaineCare clients pay starting salaries in the low to mid-50,000 dollar a year range. Many of these students also have families to support.

My students are bright, skilled, compassionate people who want to serve our state's most vulnerable citizens. Please support their doing so without becoming impoverished themselves.

I urge you to vote to support LD632.

Robin Russel, JD, PhD  
Professor  
School of Social Work  
University of Maine

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Hermon  
LD 632

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