

2 Main Street, Suite 35-202
Biddeford, ME 04005
(617) 866-8973

February 26, 2023

State and Local Government Committee, attn: Kristen Bowker, Committee Clerk
c/o Legislative Information Office
Cross Building, Room
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: LD #632: *Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program*

Dear Senator Joseph Rafferty, and other members of the Committee on IDEA,

I am a clinical social worker in an integrated behavioral health practice in Southern Maine. Given the current, severe lack of behavioral health specialists in our state, too many Maine residents suffering with mental health disorders are not getting the treatment they deserve and need. This disservice is negatively impacting our economy via productivity loss, heavier use of all health care resources, and greater dependence on government disability programs.

- Our state has an aging social work workforce. Since COVID, older social workers are choosing retirement over learning how to navigate tele-behavioral health services.
- The current behavioral health reimbursement and wages are not keeping up with inflation and educational debt.
- The social work field is less attractive today given its high stress and low wages, creating unique challenges in recruiting social work graduates.

The Social Work Education Loan Repayment Bill can help to reduce this negative impact on our state. A state supported student loan repayment program can revitalize the honor associated with being a social worker. Nobody enters the field of social work to make money. A recognition by the state via monetary assistance in student loan repayment can ignite the passion for humanitarian services. Today's opportunities in technology, allowing for large salaries with little to no human contact, have created a deficit in the fields that focus on mental health, the effects of poverty, race and ethnic marginalization, and the hopes of creating stronger communities.

I am one who chose passion over monetary benefits. I was working as an EHR consultant in Massachusetts. While my salary was high, my sense of job satisfaction was low. In recognition of the need for behavioral health specialists, in 2018 at the age of 50, I left my job, sold my house, and enrolled in Simmons University's master's in social work program. Upon graduation, I recognized the difficulty of living in Massachusetts on a \$55k salary, so I accepted a position in Maine. I continue to watch my life savings diminish, but I have found my passion. A forgiveness of student loans would give me, and many others in my position, greater peace of mind in our choice of career.

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

Respectfully submitted,

Suzanne Marie Staples, LMSW-cc