



Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and the good members of the IDEA Committee,

My name is Betsy Sweet and I am testifying in favor of LD 632 on behalf of the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative. The Collaborative is comprised of 8 nonprofit, community based behavioral health agencies who, collectively, serve over 70% of the people in Maine seeking mental health and SUD services. We include Sweetser, Spurwink, the Opportunity Alliance, Shalom House, KidsPeace, Oxford County Mental Health Services, Volunteers of America, and Gateway Community Services.

Please do this.

This committee is well aware of the workforce shortages in all sectors here in Maine. In the behavioral health sector, the crisis is severe and results in people not having access to critical services for their recovery, well-being and safety.

The workforce shortage in the behavioral health sector was severe before the COVID epidemic, and has intensified since in two ways- first, the number of people working in this field has diminished and two, the need for mental health services has increased significantly as a result of the epidemic.

Now, our agencies are reporting anywhere from 25-35 % of their positions, clinical positions, are unfilled. This has resulted in programs closing, clients having to wait for up to six months to see an outpatient therapist, 2-4 months for in home services for children, months for Medication management treatment, and in many rural areas there are simply no services available. As a result, we see a huge surge in behavioral health clients showing up, untreated, in hospital emergency rooms and in our jails.

Unfortunately, the rates Maine agencies have been able to pay social workers and clinicians is one of the lowest in New England. This has two consequences – it makes it almost impossible for service providers to attract and retain social workers. From the social worker side, our low rates make it challenging for them to find housing and pay for basic expenses. The requirement to pay off the significant student loans they have had to take out just to get through undergraduate and graduate school makes in financially

impossible. As a result , we have graduates of our excellent schools of social work leave the state so they can find better pay elsewhere. In a class of masters level social workers where I guest lectured last year I asked how many of the 22 students intended to stay in Maine to work and only 6 students raised their hands.

We are losing talent and access to desperately needed services. You have heard about the debt burden. We are working at the same time to increase wages and encourage young people to enter this field to help some of our most vulnerable citizens, but even that is not enough to make it possible to meet expenses.

By relieving the debt burden, Maine can, for a relatively small amount of money, increase access to critically needed services and retain some of Maine's best and most needed talent right here.

Please do this – Pass LD 632 unanimously.

Thank you.