

**Testimony for the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business
May 2, 2023**



**SPUR
WINK**

going the distance

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Regarding LD 1718: An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education.

Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and esteemed members of the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Kristen Farnham. I am VP of Legal Affairs and Advancement at Spurwink. I am here to speak in support of LD 1718. At Spurwink, we provide behavioral health and educational services to children, adults, and families across Maine. Last year, we served over 8,100 Maine people affected by trauma, mental health challenges, substance use disorders, developmental disabilities and autism, so they can lead healthy, engaged lives in their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 1718, which is a visionary bill in support of educational attainment. The bill would award a tuition voucher to a worker who works for a year, 30 hours per week, for a participating employer. An employee can earn up to four vouchers over four years. There are several appealing aspects to this voucher program:

- The vouchers are good for five years;
- The vouchers have a value up to \$4,000 and can be used by:
 - o The worker;
 - o The worker's spouse or domestic partner; and/or
 - o The worker's children or grandchildren, creating a legacy opportunity.
- The vouchers can be used all at once, or one at a time within the University System, Community College System or at Maine Maritime Academy.

There are several reasons that Spurwink is here in support of LD 1718:

First, it will help us fill jobs, making the critical job of direct support worker more appealing. In our Adult programs that employ essential care workers, we have 24 FTE open positions at this time, and cannot compete with the wages offered at other local businesses. We are currently filling positions with 235 hours per month of contracted staff due to the inability to hire. As we know, this is an inefficient way to care for our clients. Any proactive steps that we can take, such as wage increases and tuition vouchers, will help in filling these vacancies.

Second, it will help workers by encouraging educational attainment. Education is referred to as the great equalizer, as it can open the pathway to jobs, resources, and skills that help a person not just survive, but thrive. We also know that the cost of tuition is a major factor in a person's decision to pursue further education. By lowering the financial barriers, this bill will allow more Maine people to pursue their educational goals.

Third, LD 1718 will help families. By allowing a worker's family member to use the tuition voucher, the bill is offering a multi-generational solution and reducing the financial barriers to pursuit of post-secondary education. This option will open the door to educational attainment for many more people.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, we see this bill as an anti-poverty measure. As we know, education reduces income inequality. It also promotes economic growth as it offers skills that increase employment opportunities and income. UNESCO reports that nearly 60 million people could escape poverty if all adults had just two more years of schooling. We'd like to see Maine take steps to be part of that solution.

We greatly appreciate the vision for a brighter Maine that LD 1718 represents. I urge your support for this bill. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Kristen Farnham
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