



Alliance for Addiction and Mental Health Services, Maine
The unified voice for Maine's community behavioral health providers

Malory Otteson Shaughnessy, Executive Director

Testimony in Support of LD 1718
An Act to Amend the Social Work Education Loan Repayment Program

Sponsored by Representative Meyer
May 2, 2023

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Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. I am Malory Shaughnessy, a resident of Westbrook, and here on behalf of the Alliance for Addiction and Mental Health Services. The Alliance is the statewide association representing the majority of Maine's community-based mental health and substance use treatment providers. The Alliance advocates for the implementation of sound policies and evidence-based practices that serve to enhance the quality and effectiveness of our behavioral health care system.

On behalf of the Alliance, I am here to speak in support of LD 1718, "An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education." This bill creates the **Essential Support Worker Tuition Grant Program** to provide up to 4 education vouchers equal to a year's tuition up to \$4,000 for an essential support worker employed at in-home or community support services reimbursed by the MaineCare program or other state program, or a family member of the essential support worker.

Mainers all across our state are having a hard time finding home care, behavioral health services, support for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and access to assisted living and nursing home care for themselves and their loved ones.

Maine doesn't have enough "essential support workers" – people who work in home and community-based settings to provide vital assistance and daily support with core aspects of life to all kinds of people who need help. This means thousands of older people, people who have physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, and people with behavioral health challenges cannot get the support they need.

In fact, a recent report, *The High Cost of Undervaluing Direct Care Work*¹, "details the far-reaching costs of our broken direct care system. Some of the findings include:

- Our collective failure to adequately support direct care workers is keeping more than 8,000 people out of Maine's labor force.

¹ Arthur Phillips, Economic Policy Analyst & Josie Phillips, State Priorities Partnership Fellow. The High Cost of Undervaluing Direct Care Work. April 26, 2023. Accessed: <https://www.mecpep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/The-High-Cost-of-Undervaluing-Direct-Care-Work.pdf>

- Maine is missing out on over \$1 billion per year in additional economic activity as a result of people dropping out of the labor force due to direct care challenges.
- Undervaluing care work imposes significant public costs on our state, as low wages lead more workers to rely on public assistance programs, including MaineCare and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Meanwhile, the decline in labor force participation due to direct care responsibilities means fewer workers are contributing taxes. These combine to cost our state and federal budgets more than \$70 million each year.
- Direct care workforce shortages place undue strains on Maine’s health care system. In March 2023, Maine Medical Center had about 50 people under its care who were approved for discharge but could not find an alternative care setting; meanwhile, Northern Light Health noted that over a nearly six-month period, the cost of delayed discharges across the system’s hospitals totaled \$13.6 million and amounted to approximately \$63,000 per person.”

Clearly, the workforce shortage of essential direct care workers is harming us all. I urge committee members to support LD 1718 and applaud Representative Meyer for bringing it forward. Thank you.