



DATE: May 2, 2023
TO: Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations
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RE: **Support for LD 1718, An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education**

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business: I write on behalf of the University of Maine System (UMS) in support of LD 1718, *An Act to Encourage Participation in Maine's Essential Support Workforce Through Access to Higher Education*.

As Maine's largest education and economic development asset and one of its largest employers, with more than 30,000 students, faculty and staff who are also parents, children, spouses and siblings, **our System relies upon, respects and values the state's direct care workforce**. We recognize the severe shortage of direct care workers challenges our students and employees to fully meet their university commitments and threatens the health and productivity of Maine's people, communities and economy.

UMS is grateful that Representative Meyer and LD 1718's cosponsors and supporters rightfully recognize that **public postsecondary education is the most proven path to social and economic mobility**, and thus that tuition vouchers to Maine's public universities, community colleges and maritime academy could be a compelling recruitment and retention benefit. A bachelor's degree improves one's earnings, health and life expectancy, and decreases the likelihood of poverty and unemployment. For example, **working age alumni of our flagship, the University of Maine, earn more than double the state's average median income** and pay nearly 50% more in state income taxes.

Maine's Commission to Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues noted in [its 2020 report](#) that direct care worker turnover rates were as high as 70% annually and that "more employees were leaving for small incremental increases in pay than ever before." LD 1718 does not directly address wages and working conditions, yet we see the education voucher program it proposes as a win-win. These vouchers will **provide direct care workers a valuable incentive that supplements their pay and increases their earning potential and career opportunities through postsecondary educational attainment**. At the same time, this benefit also **improves patients' health, safety and ability to live in the community** by reducing direct care worker turnover and strengthening employees' professional knowledge and skills.

Based on our experience with other tuition voucher programs for which funding is limited, we encourage the Legislature to provide the Finance Authority of Maine direction on how to prioritize applications and also adequate appropriation for its important administrative duties.

Thank you for your support of the University of Maine System and your ongoing efforts to ensure door-opening postsecondary education is accessible to all Mainers.