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## **HealthReach supports LD 703.**

**The healthcare applicant pool is drying up in rural Maine.  
Support our efforts to maintain crucial healthcare services across our state.**

Esteemed members of the Committee on Labor – my name is Brenda Bowden, and I serve as the Director of Human Resources for HealthReach Community Health Centers. HealthReach provides primary care services across a broad swath of rural Central and Western Maine: in Albion, Belgrade, Bethel, Bingham, Fairfield, Kingfield, Livermore Falls, Lovejoy, Madison, Rangeley, Richmond, Strong, and the village of Coopers Mills within Whitefield. Alongside Maine's other community health centers, we together compose *the largest independent primary care network in the state* – 1 in 5 Mainers visit their local community health center for affordable, accessible, high-quality healthcare.

**HealthReach strongly supports LD 703, "An Act to Establish a Health Care Gap Year Program for Recent College Graduates".** We thank the bill sponsors for bringing this important legislation forward.

HealthReach is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit network of 12 Community Health Centers (CHCs). Our 275 staff annually serve 26,000 patients across 100,000 visits through primary and preventative healthcare, including behavioral health and dental services. Our locations are situated in otherwise medically underserved communities. We serve patients that come from 9 of Maine's 16 counties, and our Connector and Substance Use Disorder programs serve Mainers statewide. As members of the same communities we serve, we are acutely aware that our services have stood as a lifeline for rural Mainers for 50 years — since 1975 and through today.

**The bill before you will help us continue to provide care for our rural patients in Central and Western Maine by supporting career pathways that lead to local nonprofit healthcare work.** While the hiring market during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 response has been challenging to navigate, many of our challenges in securing new healthcare workers have been on a poor trajectory for some time, actually predating the

emergence of COVID-19. Over the last two years, HealthReach has had the opportunity to partner with the Roux Institute in piloting a healthcare gap year program. We have seen great success in this partnership, and this has addressed some of our most critical staffing challenges by supporting a supplemental workforce within our community health centers. The new perspective brought into our clinics by enthusiastic student-healthcare workers has also helped to inform our workflows and improve our overall operations.

As you know, direct care healthcare positions are at a critical low in the State of Maine. The gap year program has offered an innovative solution that is meeting immediate needs. We hope for these reasons that you choose to support LD 703, "An Act to Establish a Health Care Gap Year Program for Recent College Graduates".

**Please support us in our mission to continue to deliver urgently needed local, affordable, high-quality healthcare to the people of Maine through LD 703.**

On behalf of HealthReach and our 26,000 patients, I thank you for your consideration of this important bill and our testimony.

**Brenda Bowden**

*Director of Human Resources*

**HealthReach Community Health Centers**