

Testimony in Support of LD 1956, "An Act to Amend the Law Governing the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program and Establish the Community Workforce Connections Program"

Arthur Phillips
May 13, 2025

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor. My name is Arthur Phillips, I am an analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy. I am testifying in support of LD 1956 to build on an existing pilot program to help under- and unemployed people connect with existing training and work opportunities.

The pandemic exposed how many unemployed workers are not connected to programs designed to help them get back on their feet and employed in a productive occupation. Out of that awareness came improvements to our state's unemployment insurance program and the creation of the Peer Workforce Navigator pilot program. This bill would continue that good work and allow more people to access these services through the Community Workforce Connections Program.

One of the major challenges facing Maine's economy is how to meet our needs with a plateauing workforce. A critical part of that is to connect workers in our state with support, training, and employment opportunities that will set them up for long-term success.

In recent years, Maine has experienced lower unemployment than any time in recent history, to the benefit of workers across our state and in most demographic categories.ⁱ However, workers with less education still have higher rates of unemployment, as do older Mainers, people of color, and disabled workers. There are a variety of explanations for why these gaps persist, which is why person-centered navigation services that connect people to education, training, and employment channels that suit them can help improve our state's overall workforce picture.

Culturally competent navigator services provided by organizations that have built trust in communities are an important component for connecting people to unemployment services and programs that put them on high-quality career paths. One assessment of the Peer Workforce Navigator program found clients experienced improved access to unemployment insurance and higher rates of reemployment compared to workers in New England.ⁱⁱ

Having under- or unemployed workers take the first job available to them, regardless of skills or pay, because they cannot successfully access programs due to administrative burdens is detrimental to our economy's productivity. Conversely, when workers are connected to unemployment insurance and other supports, as well as educational or training opportunities, they can pursue fields that match their interests and skills. In the long run, this can lead to lower unemployment and reliance on public programs, higher earnings, and increased tax revenue. Such outcomes would pay dividends to workers, employers, and our state's overall economy.

The Community Workforce Connections Program can strengthen our labor force participation and connect workers to jobs they're suited for. It can do so while also addressing persistent gaps in employment and income by ensuring that more Mainers can find and keep good jobs with family-sustaining wages and benefits. For these reasons, I urge you to support this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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ⁱ James Myall, MECEP, "State of Working Maine 2024: Gains and Gaps in a Strong Economy," October 2024, available at <https://www.mecep.org/jobs-and-income/state-of-working-maine-2024/>

ⁱⁱ Center for American Progress, "Community Navigators Can Increase Access to Unemployment Benefits and New Jobs While Building Worker Power," October 2024, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/community-navigators-can-increase-access-to-unemployment-benefits-and-new-jobs-while-building-worker-power/>