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***Testimony of Sen. Eloise Vitelli introducing
LD 1564, An Act To Amend the Laws Governing Unemployment Compensation
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
May 3, 2021***

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, esteemed members of the Labor and Housing Committee, my name is Eloise Vitelli, and I represent Senate District 23, which includes all of Sagadahoc County and the Town of Dresden in Lincoln County. I am before you today to introduce LD 1564, "An Act To Amend the Laws Governing Unemployment Compensation."

I am pleased to be sponsoring this bill on behalf of the Department of Labor. During the first half of the pandemic, when Maine's tourism season was decimated, tens of thousands of Mainers found themselves applying for unemployment insurance, or UI, many for the very first time. They were confronted with a system that was both unprepared to meet the sudden surge in demand, and out of synch with the needs of many Mainers. To make improvements that will directly benefit Mainers, giving them meaningful help when they need it most, the Department has proposed several changes to existing policies.

Keeping workers connected with their employers, or with the workforce more broadly, makes it easier to go back to work full-time when the time comes. One provision of this bill increases the wages a recipient can earn while still receiving partial UI. This makes it easier for people to work part-time and remain in the labor force, while supplementing these wages with benefits so that they can afford to live. Another provision will make reemployment services available to more recipients, particularly those who find themselves repeatedly receiving UI. These individuals are most in need of additional support to find long-term employment, and are currently not benefitting from this program.

Other elements of this bill are designed to support working families, who were hit hard during the past year. Data show that during the pandemic, women were forced to leave the workforce, and have been slower to return, at higher rates than men. The disparity is even higher for women of color. Caretaking responsibilities disproportionately fall to the women in a home, and when child or elder care suddenly disappears these women often have to leave work until they can find a new solution.

This bill will allow workers who have to voluntarily quit a job because of sudden loss of child or elder care to still be eligible for benefits once they are able and available to work again. By allowing this, we are not penalizing workers who have had to leave a job in order to do what's right for their family. For similar reasons, this bill raises the weekly dependent benefit recipients

with children receive. These benefits help to bridge the gap while recipients seek out new child care, and this new amount more accurately reflects the costs of having a child at home.

This bill also undertakes to modernize the system in several ways. Throughout the pandemic, when in-person meetings were too risky, recipients going through the appeals process were allowed to participate in hearings remotely. This bill enshrines this practice in statute, making remote participation an option moving forward. Remote participation is not only useful during a pandemic, but beneficial for many rural Mainers or Mainers with limited transportation who may already face additional hurdles to getting back to work.

This bill also offers several measures intended to streamline the UI program. During an emergency or rapidly-evolving situation, it can be difficult for the Commission to come to a speedy decision. This bill transfers rule-making authority and the ability to grant overpayment waivers from the Unemployment Commission to the Commissioner, who is better equipped to respond in a timely manner. The bill also puts in place an additional automatic trigger of extended benefits, allowing a quicker response to times of high unemployment.

I thank the committee for its thoughtful consideration of these complex issues. I know you are being presented several options to solve the challenges we face, and I am confident this committee will pass a set of solutions that will improve life for Mainers. Laura Boyett, Director of the Bureau of Unemployment Compensation, is also here to testify today, and I would encourage you to direct questions about the specifics of this bill to her.

Again, thank you for consideration, and I'd be happy to take any questions.