

**Testimony in Support of
LD 898:
An Act to Provide Incentives to Unemployed Workers to Become Part of the Caregiver Workforce
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Good morning Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and honorable members of the Labor and Housing Committee. My name is Sandy Butler. I live in Orono and am a professor of social work at the University of Maine. This testimony is provided in support of LD 898, which implements a number of the recommendations made in the January 2020 report from the Commission to Study Long-Term Care Workforce Issues. I had the good fortune to sit on that Commission, and I believe all the report's recommendations were well considered and important as we continue to address the severe shortages in direct workers in Maine—shortages that will only get worse as our population ages, unless we act now

LD 898 addresses recommendation 11 under Workforce Development, and recommendations 23 through 25 under Public Assistance, and is particularly focused on home care aides (HCAs). I have been conducting research on the experiences of HCAs in Maine for the past 15 years. I'd like to briefly share with you some of my research findings as they underscore the need for programs such as those proposed in this bill.

Why This is an Important Issue

Home care aides provide help to individuals who need assistance with activities of daily living (such as bathing and dressing) and instrumental activities of daily living (such as cooking and cleaning). Most people receive that assistance from informal caregivers, i.e., family and friends. The need for paid caregivers, or formal caregivers, has increased with changes in the workforce and in the structure of families: more women work outside the home than was true in past generations; simultaneously, there has been an increase in divorce rates and a decline in the number of children families have (Hess & Hegewisch, 2019). As informal caregivers are less available, or not available at all, HCAs pick up this crucial caring work.

Currently, about 8 million Americans who need personal assistance live at home, and 15 percent of those individuals require paid HCAs (Iezzoni, Gallopin & Scales, 2019). The need for personal assistance services is expected to grow in tandem with the aging of the US population. The number of Americans adults aged 65 and older is projected to double between 2015 and 2060 (from 46 to 98 million) and for those, aged 85 and older, this increase will be more than three-fold (from 6 to 20 million; Hess & Hegewisch, 2019). In Maine, the demographic picture is the same: Over the next 15 years, the proportion of adults 65 and older in Maine will grow from 16% to 28% (Maine DASF, 2018).

Not surprisingly, the HCA workforce in the US has also been growing. It more than doubled between 2008 and 2018, increasing in size from 898,000 to 2.3 million workers (Scales, 2019). This is likely an undercount as these numbers do not include workers employed privately by individuals needing assistance, but only those employed through agencies. The workforce is expected to add another million jobs between 2018 and 2028, making it the US occupation with the greatest projected growth (Scales, 2019). This is true in Maine as well; personal care and services make up one of the fastest growing occupational groups (Maine DoL, 2016). But sadly, due to low wages and little chance for advancement, it is not a job many can afford to take.

Research Findings

Twelve years ago, I carried out a longitudinal study related to turnover among HCAs in Maine and involving 261 Personal Support Specialists (what HCAs are called in Maine) from across the state (Butler, Simpson, Brennan & Turner, 2010; Butler, Wardamasky, Brennan-Ing, 2012). Over an 18-month period, more than one third of the research participants left their jobs, many to take higher paying work they were less drawn to than caring for their consumers. In interviews they told us they were forced to look for other work because they just could not make ends meet. As one 41-year-old woman said; “The pay wasn’t that great. The part where they didn’t pay mileage: I ended up losing money on the whole thing, so it really wasn’t worth it for me.” My research indicated that older workers were more likely to remain in the home care field than younger workers, sometimes because they had other income in the home, had health insurance through Medicare, and/or had less need to work full time. Younger workers, while they might have loved their clients and the work, often found it unaffordable, especially if they were raising children. These younger workers especially could benefit from the pilot programs proposed in LD 898.

Three years ago, when our State’s minimum wage was rising from \$9 to \$10 per hour, I completed another small study regarding the job experiences of home care aides (Butler, 2020). This was a two-state inquiry and the site of the companion study was Baltimore, Maryland, where the minimum wage was \$15. Interestingly, low pay remained a key impediment for some of the Maine study participants, while research participants in Maryland did not complain about pay. While all the participants wished their work was more highly valued by society and thought their training could be more comprehensive, for the purposes of this testimony I’ll share the story of one Maine woman who would have benefited greatly from the pilot program proposed in LD 898.

This study participant had worked in residential and home care for 34 years at the time of our interview. She had never been able to move out of poverty as a single mother raising two children. She loved her clients and being a caregiver, but she was physically and emotionally exhausted from the work and her unsuccessful efforts to earn an adequate income. At age 54 she was deciding to leave the work and the state to go to live with her daughter. She said, “You know, I really love my job. I love helping people. I wish it paid the bills.” As a single mother with two children, the pilot programs proposed in LD 898 might have both helped to increase her income, and thus decrease her financial stress, but also might have allowed her to reach her career goal of becoming a registered nurse. She had started a nursing program but had been unable to complete it given the demands of single parenting and full-time employment. A navigator and educational support services, as proposed in LD 898, to assist her in meeting her career goals, along with additional benefits such as TANF, SNAP or child care, would have significantly increased this HCAs chances of successfully obtaining her nursing degree—a ticket to much higher wages and steady employment.

Thank you, Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Labor and Housing Committee for allowing me to present this testimony. I urge you to support LD 898. It is a creative solution to the problems of unemployment and the workforce shortages in our long-term care system. It represents an important step towards valuing the crucial work of the low-wage workers who provide care to vulnerable members of our communities, the care that allows these Mainers to remain at home for as long as possible. These workers—largely women—need our support.

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