

**Testimony of
Donald Harden, on Behalf of Catholic Charities Maine
Regarding LD 898; "An Act To Provide Incentives to Unemployed Workers to Become Part of
the Caregiver Workforce."
Delivered in writing to the
Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
May 5, 2021**

Greetings, Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing:

My name is Don Harden and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Catholic Charities Maine, an agency I have been affiliated with for over 41 years most recently as Director of Aging Services.

As one of Maine's largest, community-based, social service agencies we provided help and hope to 101,857 Mainer's last year. An important part of our mission is providing services to older Mainer's. This includes the Independent Support Services Program, also known as the State Homemaker Program. The ISS Program assists individuals *who otherwise could not live independently* with such things as housekeeping, laundry, meal preparation, grocery shopping, and transportation for errands and appointments. Last year under ISS we served 2130 consumers in homes across all 16 counties.

I am testifying in favor of LD 898.

During 2019, I served on the Commission to Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues. At that time our report detailed unstaffed hours and waitlists for services and the demographics of a rapidly aging state, predicting that the gap between services needed and direct care workers available will only become more acute. It has gotten more acute. We currently have 1,114 people on our ISS Homemaker wait list, and 240 consumers on our unstaffed list, because we can't hire enough staff. As an employer we have taken extraordinary steps to try to keep up with the external forces making it difficult to compete for workforce.

Maine's direct care workers, are essential care workers, assisting Maine's people with some of most important tasks of daily life. Older persons not able to access adequate in-home care are placed at risk and diminished quality of life, end up accessing local ER visits and hospital stays and placed in higher level, more expensive care unnecessarily sometimes because their family members can't do it any more at great public and personal cost.

Shortages of essential care workers is also bad for the economy. Caregivers in the workplace managing gaps in care may be less productive and involve higher rates of absenteeism. Employees not able to access in-home care for family members often choose to move to part-time or leave employment; resulting in a loss of experience and skills; and recruitment and re-training costs to employer.

When released in January of 2020, our Commission's Report detailed twenty-nine recommendations for timely implementation to address these workforce shortages. The

consensus of Commission Members was that we needed to take action on all fronts to solve this problem for Maine's older citizens. Three of the Commission's recommendations relate to the area of "Public Assistance."

In studying workforce challenges, it was determined that the long-term care employment sector is reliant upon workers who are themselves highly reliant on public assistance programs due to low pay and other life challenges. In an area in which thousands of hours weekly go on unserved there are thousands of hours that could be provided by people already in the essential care workforce if there was greater flexibility in how these workers access these benefits. As a provider of homemaker services our agency has workers willing and able to take on more consumers if they had this greater flexibility.

LD 898 would provide a pilot and a pathway to further explore what opportunities there are to leverage any flexibility in this area to access this potential pool of hours as well as assist potential employees to enter the essential care workforce.

We need a vision for Maine's essential care workforce, and we need bolder action to address essential workforce shortages.

After a decade of seeing wait lists and workforce challenges grow this is the time to make significant investments in our essential care economy. I urge passage of LD 898.

Thank you for your consideration and your service to Maine's citizens.