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**From Michael Smith, Catholic Charities Maine
Regarding Catholic Charities Maine Independent Support
Services
To Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
January 31, 2022**

My name is Michael Smith, the Chief Program Officer at Catholic Charities Maine and current director of the Independent Support Services (Homemaker) Program, and I support LD 898 as revised to create the essential workforce advisory committee.

The Homemaker Program assists individuals who otherwise could not live independently through supports such as housekeeping, laundry, meal preparation, grocery shopping, as well as transportation for errands and appointments. Last year under the Homemaker Program we served 2,052 consumers across all 16 counties of the state. Many of our consumers are on fixed incomes and the help they need to live in their homes would exceed their financial means if not for the Homemaker Program. This program provides the supports needed to help people live where they want to be in the comfort of their own home.

Throughout the pandemic we have remained committed to serving our consumers in their homes, yet there has been a significant reduction in services due to shortages of our essential support workers. Despite our continued best efforts, we currently have 1,320 people on our waitlist which is an increase of 500 since 2019 and another 220 since 2020. In addition, we have another 298 people on our unstaffed list that were receiving services but have lost it due to lack of available staffing. This means more and more of our consumers are going without regular delivery of services and are on waitlists that can last for well over a year in some cases.

This past year we have also seen an increase of 23% of our consumers living alone which is now a reality for 79% of the 1,505 people we are serving. In addition, the average age of our consumers has increased by 0.8 years since 2020 to almost 72 years old. Thus, our ability to interact with those we serve becomes increasingly important as they become more vulnerable due to an increase in age and isolation.

We continue to reevaluate our strategies to hire and retain staff so we can increase services but despite our best efforts our essential support workforce census has dropped by over 23% since 2019. To help create a stable workforce we have to be creative in our approaches because for

some staff the benefits cliff is a very real concern, especially for those that are on public assistance. In these instances, our offering a few more hours of work or even a little bit more financial compensation does not adequately address their financial needs because they would lose these benefits which are worth much more than the increases. Thus, these offerings would result in them taking fewer hours of work, so their income remains sufficient to maintain public benefits. This ultimately would translate to a reduction in hours of service or even loss of services all together for some consumers as staff reduce their caseloads.

I recognize, and am appreciative, that the State is working on several positive initiatives to help address the essential care worker shortage which will hopefully alleviate some of the realities I just described. To make their work most effective, I believe the enactment of this bill will be important to create one place for everyone involved in the process to come together to get updates, set goals, track progress and offer solutions that are of service to all in the aging continuum. The Homemaker Program has select needs for its workforce, and so I would greatly value the opportunity to uplift them so our consumers get the services they need.

Thank you so much for your time and the work you do for us.

Sincerely,

Michael Smith

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