



**Testimony of Maine Public Health Association In Support of:
LD 183: An Act To Establish Juneteenth as a Paid State Holiday**

Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government
Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Rebecca Boulos. I am a resident of South Portland and executive director of Maine Public Health Association. I am here today to present testimony in support of LD 183: “An Act To Establish Juneteenth as a Paid State Holiday.”

MPHA is the state’s oldest, largest, and most diverse association for public health professionals. We represent more than 500 individual members and 30 organizations across the state. The mission of MPHA is to improve and sustain the health and well-being of all people in Maine through health promotion, disease prevention, and the advancement of health equity. As a statewide nonprofit association, we advocate, act, and advise on critical public health challenges, aiming to improve the policies, systems, and environments that underlie health inequities - but which also have potential to improve health outcomes for all people in Maine. We are not tied to a national agenda, which means we are responsive to the needs of Maine’s communities.

LD 183 establishes June 19th as a paid state holiday. The date, June 19th, marks the day in 1865 that enslaved people in Texas were notified of their freedom. It is the oldest, nationally celebrated commemoration of ending slavery in the U.S. It is noteworthy that the Emancipation Proclamation, itself, which ended slavery in the Confederacy, had taken effect 2.5 *years* earlier – it took that length of time for the proclamation to be made in Texas. In other words, June 19th is not the date enslaved people were free; it is the date they were told they were free.

Maine’s own history of racism is well-documented, although not widely known. According to a recent article in the *Portland Press Herald*, “For generations, Mainers have held onto the myth that slavery was exclusive to the South and that New Englanders were the abolitionists who helped with the Underground Railroad and supported emancipation. But there were, in fact, hundreds of enslaved people in the province of Maine, brought to rugged coastal settlements aboard ships and forced to work for the white families who lived in the area. Better known, but still seldom discussed, are Maine’s connections to the slave trade through the shipping industry.”¹

Racism is a public health crisis, a statement that has been declared by 5 states, 72 counties and 104 cities across the U.S.² Juneteenth serves as a reminder to advance racial equity in all areas of society – including health care, education, employment, housing, and justice. This date is a celebration of freedom and is a day that deserves observance as a recognized and paid holiday.

Thank you for your consideration of this historic commemoration.

¹ Graham, G. 'A missing piece:' Maine's connections to slavery are hidden in plain sight. February 14, 2021. *Portland Press Herald*.

<https://www.pressherald.com/2021/02/14/a-missing-piece-maines-connections-to-slavery-are-hidden-in-plain-sight>

² American Public Health Association. 2021. Racism is a public health crisis: Map of declarations. <https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health/racism-declarations>.