

April 7, 2021

Ben Algeo, Portland

Testimony in support of L.D. 1010, “An Act To Establish the Maine Service Fellows Program.”

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and honorable State and Local Government Committee members, my name is Ben Algeo, I live in Portland, and I am here this morning to testify in support of L.D. 1010, “An Act To Establish the Maine Service Fellows Program.” Specifically, I’d like to share with you my experience in a similar program: the Island Institute’s Island Fellows program.

By way of background, the Island Fellows program was started in 1999, and operates a lot like the proposed Maine Service Fellows Program: Recent college graduates from around the country apply, and upon acceptance they are placed with a community organization on an island or remote coastal community in Maine, where they work on community-focused service projects. Through these projects they gain valuable real-world experience, continue their education and professional development, and, importantly, make deep, long lasting connections to the communities they serve.

After graduating from the University of Maine in 2014, I applied to the Island Fellows program, was accepted, and placed with the municipally-owned electric utilities that operate on Monhegan and Matinicus Islands. These islands are not connected to the mainland electric grid, and so the utilities rely on diesel generators to supply power—a solution that is both expensive and environmentally degrading.

Of course, no one was more keenly aware of those issues than the local folks running the power company, and no one was more motivated to do something about it. The issue was time, money and capacity. No one who worked for those small organizations did it as a full-time job, and so they all had other things going on.

My job was to be the extra set of hands to take on some of those projects that would otherwise have fallen by the wayside. I helped them put together energy efficiency programs including LED lightbulb bulk purchase programs, home energy assessments, and DIY workshops, which resulted in real energy savings for their customers. We engaged in some thoughtful long-term planning around renewable energy adoption, larger-scale energy efficiency, and how those objectives tied in with broader community sustainability goals. I also did school presentations, digitized records, inventoried transformers, and whatever else was needed.

My experience in the Island Fellows program was very valuable to me. I got some incredible experience, learned a lot, and developed skills that I still use today. It also demonstrates the value that programs like this can offer Maine communities and the state as a whole.

For example, Maine has ambitious goals to reduce carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050. Fellows could be the boots on the ground making sure that work gets done by connecting homeowners with efficiency programs, engaging community processes around renewable energy, and building the local capacity to tackle these issues.

The Maine Service Fellows Program would be an invaluable resource to our state, and I hope you will support it. Thank you for your time.