

April 5, 2021

Testimony of Edward A. Barrett, Commissioner, Maine Commission for Community Services

Presented to the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government
In Support of LD 1010: "An Act to Establish the Maine Service Fellows Program"

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government:

As a member of the Maine Commission on Community Services, aka VolunteerMaine, I and fellow Commissioners have worked hard to enhance volunteerism throughout Maine, especially through providing grants for organizations seeking AmeriCorps Members. At the same time, we have come to recognize the limitations of this federal program and how difficult it is for smaller, non-profit organizations and organizations in more rural areas of Maine to access this source of funding as a way to expand their volunteer base and address identified community needs.

To help address this problem, we created a grant program specifically aimed at smaller, rural organizations. Even here, however, we have heard from grant recipients that meeting federal requirements is a severe burden. In fact, several organizations to whom grants have been awarded have, after struggling with these requirements for a year or two, concluded that the benefits of the federal program do not exceed its costs and burdens.

For these reasons, we have sought a better way to provide support for such organizations as they struggle to meet clearly defined community needs. The Maine Service Fellows Program would do this. It is designed for small communities and micro-organizations in rural areas by simplifying the application process and streamlining accountability requirements.

Maine Service Fellows Benefits

We all know that geographic areas in Maine have faced economic challenges for years, challenges that have been worsened by the pandemic. The Maine Fellows program will provide additional human resources to stressed communities to help them respond to these challenges. It will also support communities and their residents in developing pathways to and opportunities for expanding the number of community volunteers joining in this effort through the assistance of a Fellow trained and skilled in organizing community service efforts.

The need in Maine is significant. Hunger is widespread; education for our youth has been disrupted; access to healthcare is limited by distance and the lack of personal transportation; seniors struggle to stay in their homes while and communities wish to become more age friendly; and many residents face employment challenges. These are just some of the many issues that our communities are struggling to address. A Maine Service Fellow could assist in marshalling community resources and local organizations to tackle these challenges.

This program will also benefit the Fellows themselves by offering young people a meaningful opportunity to contribute their time and talent to address important community needs during a year-long, full-time effort. The program will make community service feasible for all young

adults, regardless of economic background, by providing a living allowance of just over 200% of the federal poverty level.

In a democracy, citizens have certain private rights, matched with certain public responsibilities. One of these responsibilities is to participate in one's community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner — with a focus on the common good. Research from across the U.S. has found that older teens and young adults have a high interest in community engagement, but too often lack quality service opportunities. We also know that those who do engage in volunteer or community service activities early in life tend to continue to do so as they age, providing even greater benefit to their communities.

Finally, those who serve in a community tend to set roots there. In Lewiston, the Bates students who chose to stay after graduation are almost universally those who engaged in meaningful volunteer efforts during their college years. Similarly, VolunteerMaine has found that one-quarter of AmeriCorps members who come to Maine from outside the state stay to make Maine their home. Recognizing Maine's status as the oldest State in the nation, such an influx of young, energetic, community minded individuals is and will be essential to our future.

For all of these reasons, I urge your support for LD 1010. This is a program that can make a profoundly positive impact on our state and its communities.

Sincerely,



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