



Volunteer Maine

The Maine Commission for Community Service
A Stronger Maine Through Volunteerism



**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATE
AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SUPPORT OF LD 1010, AN ACT
TO ESTABLISH THE MAINE SERVICE FELLOWS PROGRAM**

APRIL 7, 2021

BY

F. CELESTE BRANHAM

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

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to come before you once again, this time in enthusiastic support for L.D. 1010, An Act to Establish the Maine Service Fellows Program. As mentioned, my name is Celeste Branham, and, as you may recall from my prior appearance before your Committee in February, I serve as Chair of the Maine Commission for Community Service, also known as Volunteer Maine.

As you have read, L.D. 1010 stipulates a role for the Maine Commission for Community Service, both as the home for the establishment of the Maine Service Fellows Program, and also for launching in 2022 the first class of 10 program fellows who will serve up to 1800 hours over a 12-month period. We, the Commission, are also required under the proposed legislation to report to your Committee, no later than January 30, 2024, about program operations and any recommendations we may identify for improvements to the Program.

I must state at the outset, on behalf of the Commission and its staff, that we are well positioned through experience and expertise, to conduct the Maine Service Fellows Program. Why do we want to undertake this responsibility? The answer resides in the benefits that we know will accrue to both underserved communities in Maine and to young adults. Permit me to offer a brief elaboration.

Representative Rielly most ably described the Maine Service Fellows Program in concept. In a practical sense, national research supports all that the Representative has outlined. First, older teens and young adults demonstrate a remarkably high interest in community engagement. Second, this cohort once engaged in service tend to set forth deep roots where they serve. This is evidenced by 25% of young adults who move here to commit to community service tend to make Maine their home. Third, and importantly, 7 out of 10 Maine national service members have reported that the connections made during service helped their future careers and/or employment.

What is more, the Program as designed will enable young people to contribute their time and talent toward community recovery. Many communities are facing serious socio-economic and public health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and additional human resources at their disposal are vital to their recovery. One valuable characteristic of the Maine Service Fellows Program is its expansion of service to more diverse organizations, especially small rural communities, and the simplification of the hosting application process and streamlining accountability requirements, which are currently often insurmountable at the federal level for those organizations and agencies.

Localities will define their most pressing needs and associated projects, for example, in the areas of workforce development, substance use prevention and recovery, public safety and public health issues.

Please note that we project substantial interest in the Maine Service Fellows Program, both from rural communities and potential Fellows. Currently, applications for federal service programs outpace actual positions by 4 applicants to every 1 position. Just as in the recession of 2008 when applications for service positions surged, we expect the same response during a pandemic whose conclusion is yet unknown. For Service Fellows, these placements become a vehicle to try new career paths, hone skills, and build personal networks for employment.

Thus, given the immediate needs of rural communities, stressed by an enduring public health crisis; the desire to retain skilled, young adults in our State and their own notable commitment to service; the greater ease for underserved communities to apply for and receive not only Fellows, but also training and coaching support from the Commission in this Program; and the Commission's most appropriate role as the home for this pilot program, I can state unequivocally that the Maine Commission for Community Services urges your support for the vision and realization of L.D. 1010.

Thank you.