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Testimony of Representative Morgan Rielly presenting

LD 1010, “An Act To Establish the Maine Service Fellows Program”

Before the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Morgan Rielly, and I represent House District 34, which includes part of Westbrook. I am here today to present **LD 1010, An Act To Establish the Maine Service Fellows Program**.

This bill establishes the Maine Service Fellows Program (MSF) under the Maine Commission for Community Service. MSF will address a crucial gap in service programming here in the state by making sure underserved rural communities that don't have the capacity for traditional Americorps programming are served.

MSF is designed to attract and retain younger Mainers. The program will pay service fellows a living wage for their work and provide some student loan reimbursements upon completion of service, making this program appealing to the thousands of young people in Maine who find themselves in debt after graduation. These benefits will make service a reality for many young Mainers who want to serve but are unable to because they can't afford to do so.

Expanding and creating service opportunities is of personal interest to me. While in high school, I spent much of my time interviewing and listening to World War II veterans. The men and women I got to know, and have become friends with, have had a profound impact on my life. They passed along many of their life lessons to me that I will carry and share for many years to come. One of the lessons that resonated with me is to lead a life of service. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century and are nearing the end of a pandemic that has taken the lives of over half a million Americans, it is evident that we need a new generation of Mainers to step forward to serve and embody our state motto of *Dirigo: I Lead*. I've joined forces with Representative

Carlow of Buxton, the youngest Republican House member, and Representative Warren of Scarborough, the youngest Independent House member, in putting forward this program. Together, we represent a new generation of leaders in this state united in service and eager to aid fellow Mainers in need. Service is and should be nonpartisan.

MSF is specifically designed to recruit and retain motivated young adults and recent college graduates in rural and underserved Maine communities to address critical health, public safety, education and environmental needs. Likewise, the program is designed to strengthen civic engagement of both Fellows and community residents through volunteer service-based solutions. This is in part a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is also to address long-term issues involving public health (especially mental health and substance use), housing, workforce development and the need to retain recent college graduates and young persons in the state long-term.

I have worked closely with Volunteer Maine, the state service commission, to develop this program. MSF was born out of a “service think tank” that Volunteer Maine hosted in the Fall of 2020. The participants represented small municipal offices, nonprofits, school districts, elected officials and businesses. They recognized that we need to expand service programming in the state to address the negative economic impact rural communities have faced from the COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when Maine communities are seeking support and Maine’s young people need career opportunities, the MSF Program is needed now more than ever.

MSF is designed to complement the existing Maine Americorps program and is specifically designed for our small communities and micro-organizations in rural areas, allowing for a quicker implementation of the program on the ground and, therefore, a quicker return on investment. Communities can access Fellows’ help more rapidly because the application process and accountability requirements will be streamlined. As a state-based service program, a broader set of community needs can be addressed, as opposed to federally-prescribed funding priorities. Our small towns know what they need, and the MSF Program will give them the support to take on these issues.

MSF will make up a single corps but will be dispersed to serve with sponsoring organizations in rural communities. While Fellows will provide direct service, they will also build the capacity of the host organization to recruit and mobilize volunteers. Fellows will also commit some of their time to developing regional networks of volunteer leaders and programs whose common or complementary goals would benefit from sharing information or collaborating. This will help build up human infrastructure and support systems in rural communities.

Creating a new program amid a tight budget will undoubtedly concern some. However, MSF is a fiscally smart investment that will not only pay for itself, but bring future financial returns within the communities it operates in.

Because MSF addresses COVID-19 economic relief in rural communities, it qualifies for American Rescue Plan funds that will be coming to our state. For \$350,000 a year (for three years) with American Rescue Plan funds, we can fully fund the three-year pilot program. This usage of federal funds will save Maine taxpayers money in addressing COVID-19 relief and in establishing the MSF Program.

Service programs in Maine, as seen with Maine's Conservation Corps, typically generate \$3 in return investments for every \$1 that is spent, which stays in the communities service members operate in. Using the American Rescue Funds, the amount invested in the MSF program has the ability to generate a return that is threefold. This is a fiscally smart investment that will leverage federal funds in order to make the strongest possible impact in aiding rural communities that don't have the capacity for traditional Americorps programming.

A generation of young Mainers are ready to serve and meet this moment and this decade. They now need to be given the chance.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions or to provide you with any information for your upcoming work session.