

Testimony in support of LD 1034, “An Act To Provide Funding To Support the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations”**April 14, 2021****James Myall**

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is James Myall, and I’m here to testify today in support of LD 1034 in two capacities. I’m testifying both as a policy analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy, and in my capacity as a member of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations.

MECEP supports LD 1034’s goals of supporting the work of the Permanent Commission with expanded powers and ongoing state funding. These are essential steps for Maine to continue the work of dismantling systemic racism in our state.

Over the past year, the Commission has conducted important work. With the help of legislators, it reviewed outstanding legislation from the 129th Legislature and recommended a package of bills to help improve racial equity in Maine.¹ The Commission has hired a consultant to help develop a workplan and codify an organizational structure. And we have worked alongside Dr. Nirav Shah and staff at the Centers for Disease Control to address racial disparities in Maine’s COVID-19 response.

Moreover, the Commission has more work ahead. Several bills have been introduced this session asking the Commission to examine racial disparities in Maine’s existing agricultural, health, and justice systems.²

I serve on the Commission’s judicial subcommittee. Our work plan for the upcoming year includes conversations with the Acting Chief Justice, public defenders, and other stakeholders about the status of Maine’s judicial system. We’re planning to examine whether the judiciary itself is reflective of Maine’s racial and ethnic makeup; whether the criminal justice system in Maine is adequately serving people of color; and how the state can support the sovereignty of tribal courts.

This work requires time and resources. To date, the Commission has been able to conduct its work through a combination of volunteered time from commissioners, assistance from the Office of the Speaker of the House, and the generosity of private donations from groups such as Volunteers for America. While these resources have been invaluable to our work, they are all temporary solutions. If the Commission is to truly be a permanent and ongoing project, it needs ongoing funding from the legislature.

Maine is affected by the same legacy of racial discrimination, exclusion, and injustice as our country and as any other state. With the creation of the Commission, the Legislature committed itself to building a truly level playing field on which all Mainers can thrive, regardless of their racial and ethnic

backgrounds. The past year has demonstrated the need for this work clearly, in both Maine's racially disparate COVID-19 experiences and in the injustices we've seen in police conduct nationwide.

If Maine is serious about offering "the way life should be" to everyone, we must be willing to fund this work on an ongoing basis.

LD 1034, with the proposed amendment, will help the Commission's work in several ways:

- The addition of permanent staff will allow the commissioners to focus on the long-term work of the Commission. The current situation requires commissioners to spend too much time in the weeds of research, correspondence, and scheduling.
- Funding for permanent staff and professional services will also help the Commission more comprehensively meet its charge of conducting community outreach and listening sessions, providing in-depth data analysis, and making recommendations to all three branches of government.
- Compensating commissioners for their expenses reflects the reality that this work requires commissioners' time and is likely to involve travel within the next budget cycle. While I personally am fortunate enough to be doing this work as part of my day job, many of my fellow commissioners are serving in addition to their usual work and deserve to be compensated appropriately.
- Allowing the Commission to submit legislation at any point during the session better reflects our role as advisory to state government than the current language. This provision would allow the Commission to respond promptly when it identifies problems to be addressed.

The work of examining and dismantling racial injustice is hard. There is no magic wand to end the legacy of centuries of policies and practice that put opportunity, prosperity, and safety out of reach for people of color. It takes time and sustained effort. That's why the work of bodies like the Commission is critically important. The Commission can tackle these problems over a longer period of time than any two-year legislative session or even a four-year gubernatorial term. But to do so, the Commission must be funded adequately and empowered to fully make a difference.

I urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 1034. Thank you. I'll be happy to take any questions.

Notes

¹ "Recommendations to the Legislature," *Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations*, Sept 2020. https://www.maine.gov/labor/pcrit/reports/2020_LegReport.pdf

² LD 870, "Resolve, Directing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations To Study the Impact of Policies Regarding Agriculture, Access to Land, Access to Grants and Access to Financing on African-American and Indigenous Farmers in the State;" LD 1113, "Resolve, To Direct the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations To Study and Propose Solutions to Disparities in Access to Prenatal Care in the State;" and LD 1226, "Resolve, Directing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations To Examine Restorative Justice."

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Please find attached testimony from the Maine Center for Economic Policy in support of LD 1034.