



Boots2Roots partners with Military Members transitioning from active duty to find meaningful work in Maine, while providing a pipeline of talent to Maine employers.

March 8, 2021

Testimony of Jen Fullmer in support of **LD 542**,
An Act to Provide Support Services for Military Members Transitioning to Civilian Life in Maine

Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo, and honorable members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee, my name is Jen Fullmer, I am the Board Chair for Boots2Roots, founding Boots2Roots Executive Director, and Retired U.S. Air Force Colonel. I am providing testimony in support of LD 542, *An Act to Provide Support Services for Military Members Transitioning to Civilian Life in Maine*. In 2019, Governor Mills appointed me to the State Workforce Board (SWB). In my SWB capacity, I represent the greater SWB at the SWB subcommittee for Veterans Employment and I am currently serving on the Grow Local Talent working group as part of the Maine DECD's work in implementing Maine's 10-year Economic Development Strategy.

The Governor's 10-Year Economic Development Strategy (EDS) states that, "Maine is at an economic crossroads," it "forecasts a 65,000 person contraction in the workforce over the ten years unless robust countermeasures are undertaken," and emphasizes that "the attraction of new workers from beyond our borders is a compelling need."¹ One of Maine's three stated 10-Year Strategic Goals is to attract 75,000 people to Maine's talent pool.² Of this 75,000, it is estimated that 30,000 can be added to the workforce by increasing labor force participation of people currently residing in Maine.³ That leaves us with the challenge of attracting at least 45,000 workers to Maine from outside of the state. LD 542 will provide important resources to tackle this problem head on.

In November 2020, the Governor's Economic Recovery Committee final report was published with recommendations to bring Maine closer to the vision of the EDS.⁴ In this plan, the recommended initial investment in facilitating increased labor force participation is \$93 million and the recommended initial investment in entrepreneurship is \$100 million.⁵ The recommended initial investment to attract new talent to Maine is only \$5 million, which is equivalent to the average annual tourism marketing investment.⁶ For just the economic recovery plan alone, recommendations to address internal workforce recovery and development total more than \$190 million for 30,000 new workers versus a \$5 million to attract 45,000 new workers from out of state, despite the recognition that "attracting new Mainers is critical to our economic future."⁷

Marketing strategies alone have not proven successful in the past in attracting new talent in the numbers that Maine needs. A public-private multi-axis approach to the problem is a necessity. There are existing organizations and partnerships that are successfully attracting new and quality talent to Maine. Boots2Roots is one example of a proven collaborative model that is attracting high-quality veteran worker families to Maine. Boots2Roots is a successful, scalable model that serves active duty military members transitioning to Maine and facilitates their success before they even arrive. It is the only organization in Maine that focuses exclusively on working with these families up to a year before they separate from service to set them up for immediate success upon arriving in Maine. This not only includes preparing them and connecting them with great Maine employers, but also providing concierge-type services by connecting transitioning service members (Teammates) with the right agencies to assist with all aspects of transition, including peer mentors, realtors, VA contacts, educational resources, etc. More than 50 percent of the almost 200 Teammates that Boots2Roots has served are not native Mainers and many of them testify that they thought they would have to give up on moving to Maine if it weren't for the assistance of the Boots2Roots team.



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Boots2Roots is not a recruiting firm. It was created to fill a gap in services for active duty military members transitioning to Maine. Maine has an extensive and dynamic network of public, private, and nonprofit organizations who collaborate regularly on all aspects of veteran employment in Maine. Each organization specializes in assisting specific sectors of Maine's veteran population, especially veterans with barriers to employment. Before Boots2Roots, there were no targeted services to prepare and connect active duty military members *before* they come to Maine. While Maine's Department of Labor runs important and successful veteran programs, they are limited in the support they can provide to military members who are not yet Maine residents. Connecting and preparing transitioning military members well before they transition to Maine has proven critical to their success from the start.

In 2018, the Regional Director of Veteran's Inc. in Lewiston stated that the number one root cause of veteran homelessness in Maine is financial insecurity. Boots2Roots' proactive focus enables Maine's newest veterans to quickly connect with the right job and community connections even before they arrive in Maine. This is important for hitting the ground running in civilian life and making them less likely to develop common barriers generated from financial instability and the negative physical and mental health impacts that it can create. Out of more than 100 active duty military members who transitioned to Maine with Boots2Roots, 91% were employed within two months of arriving in Maine and 94% have remained in their first post-military job in Maine for over a year. These statistics illustrate a success far greater than national averages.⁸ LD 542 will help broaden these successes for a much larger number of transitioning military members and significantly benefit Maine business and communities.

When the 10-Year EDS was published, the Maine Department of Economic Development planning efforts began with identifying examples of existing programs that "are working," and can be leveraged. Boots2Roots is a prime example of a proven model that is scalable and outcome-driven, with a consistent record of success. As Maine looks toward economic recovery, a program like Boots2Roots will continue to be an important enabler. The transitioning military population is an important demographic to target in Maine's workforce attraction efforts. Boots2Roots, Live & Work in Maine, and several corporate partners are already collaboratively moving forward with some workforce attraction initiatives. LD 542 will leverage proven models by building their capacity to significantly increase numbers of new veteran families and workers to Maine.

The \$200,000 annual investment in workforce attraction that LD 542 provides will facilitate attraction of a steady stream of high-quality workforce talent to Maine and will generate an exponential return to the state annually in real dollars. For example, one veteran family who moves to Maine, is employed at a Maine company with a \$65 thousand salary, purchases a median cost home, whose family utilizes federal GI Bill benefits in Maine's University system, and has any number of federal veterans benefits, is immediately contributing to Maine's economy via income and property taxes and community spending. If Maine can attract just one percent of the 200,000 military members who transition each year, it could equate to 20,000 new workers and millions of dollars over ten years. Boots2Roots estimates that the transitioning active duty military population over the past three years has generated more than \$19 million immediate return on investment for Maine.⁹

COVID 19 made Maine's economic situation, as described in the 10-Year Economic Development Strategy, more severe and more in need of cost-sharing, public and private partnerships to efficiently and effectively address Maine's current and projected workforce crisis. It is in our collective best

Jen Fullmer, Board Chair
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interest to invest in collaborative efforts that build on existing, proven programs to start quickly and efficiently driving recovery and long-term workforce solutions today. The \$200,000 annual investment with LD 542 will generate exponential return on investment for Maine now and well into the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony. I was a transitioning active duty service member and I chose Maine. I still choose Maine. I know that collectively, our purposeful and deliberate investment in attracting active duty servicemembers and their families will allow Maine to achieve its development goals and make our State stronger.

Sincerely,

Jen Fullmer, Col. U.S. Air Force Ret.
Boots2Roots Board Chair

¹ Maine Department of Economic and Community Development. (2019). Maine Economic Development Strategy 2020-2019. Retrieved from

https://www.maine.gov/decd/sites/maine.gov.decd/files/inlinefiles/DECD_120919_sm.pdf

² Ibid, 25.

³ Ibid, 26.

⁴ Governor's Economic Recovery Committee. (2020). Recommendations to Sustain and Grow Maine's Economy, November 24, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/Maine%20ERC%20Report_FINAL_11242020.pdf

⁵ Ibid, 12-14.

⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pew Research Center. (2019). The American Veteran Experience and the Post 9/11 Generation. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/09/the-transition-to-post-military-employment/#:~:text=A%20closer%20look%20at%20post,the%20start%20of%20their%20search.>

⁹ Boots2Roots. "Return on Investment." (2019)

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