

State of Maine

130th Legislature

Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business

Testimony of Bryan Wyatt, MA, on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association

April 20, 2021

Supporting:

LD 1327, "An Act To Create the Maine Health Care Provider Loan Repayment Program"

Sponsored by Representative Bailey

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business, I am Bryan Wyatt, Director of Policy and Communications at Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA). MPCA is a membership organization that includes all of Maine's 20 Community Health Centers (CHCs).

Maine's Community Health Centers make up the largest primary care network in the state, providing comprehensive, high quality medical, behavioral, and dental care for more than 210,000 people each year or approximately 1 in 6 Mainers. CHCs are at the forefront of delivering care to rural and underserved Maine communities, and serve patients regardless of their health insurance status or ability to pay.

Maine Primary Care Association strongly supports LD 1327 and thanks Representative Bailey and the other sponsors for bringing this extremely important and timely legislation forward.

If adopted, we believe this legislation would help level the recruitment playing field across New England for Maine providers, provide a much needed sense of financial security for health care professionals pursuing career opportunities in Maine and help entice the doctors, dentists, and other providers already being educated and trained in-state at the University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine to actually stay in Maine after they graduate.

As you know, Maine has a medical and dental workforce shortage, which has escalated into a crisis. All of our CHCs are confronted with the same challenges in recruiting enough health care providers, primarily in our state's most rural and underserved communities. It takes some of our health centers between 2-3 years to recruit a provider. For every day that goes by in which their vacancies go unfilled, access to care is impacted, as well as the health center's financial sustainability, since providers help generate the necessary reimbursements and revenue that helps the health center keep its doors open to all in need of care.

In New England and across the country, states have implemented generous loan repayment programs for health care providers.¹ Without a similar program here in Maine, providers are at a distinct disadvantage in their recruitment efforts; when you factor in all the other recent changes to the National Health Service Corps program and related funding uncertainties, the ability of our health centers to successfully fill job openings has become even more difficult.

¹ <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/funding/types/loan-repayment-programs>

One of the recommendations made by the Governor’s Economic Recovery Committee in its recent report on sustaining and growing Maine’s economy is to support public health and promote greater access to health care.² To this end, the Committee addressed, among other measures, the need for workforce growth and development programs, and specifically noted funding for loan forgiveness programs for health care professionals who move to rural parts of Maine. LD 1327 would help make this recommendation a reality.

I want to leave you with this final thought. An Executive Director at one of our more rural health centers, who also happens to be an innovative and forward-thinking recruiter, said to me, “If the state can simply help us level the playing field by making investments in provider recruitment, we can handle the retention because our experience shows if we get them, they will stay.”

On behalf of the patients, staff, and volunteers at Maine’s Community Health Centers, we urge passage of LD 1327.

Thank you for considering my comments, and please do not hesitate to contact me directly at bwyatt@mepca.org with any follow up questions.

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² https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/Maine%20ERC%20Report_FINAL_11242020.pdf