



**HEALTHREACH**  
COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS

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- FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE -

## **HealthReach supports LD 648.**

### **Our Community Health Center Staff ARE Local Public Health Workers and We Need Your Support to Improve Recruitment and Retention.**

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business – my name is Ed Molleo, and I am the Director of Communications for HealthReach Community Health Centers.

HealthReach supports LD 648, "An Act to Address Staffing Shortages in Critical Public Safety Jobs Through Economic Incentives", with a definition of "public health workers" that is inclusive of our hardworking frontline staff across Maine's Community Health Centers.

HealthReach is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit network of 12 Community Health Centers, located throughout Central and Western Maine. On an annual basis, we serve more than 26,000 patients through services that run the gamut of general preventative healthcare, dental care, and behavioral health services. Our locations are situated in otherwise medically underserved communities within this most rural state of all the United States. Our clinics span a large service area, bounded by Albion and Whitefield to the east, Bingham to the north, Rangeley and Bethel to the west, and Richmond to the south. We serve patients that come from 9 of Maine's 16 counties, and our Connector Program further provides Marketplace health insurance support for clients statewide.

It is in this context that I can confidently state, our positive impact on Maine is truly outsized when compared to our lean, efficient operations. While our continual goal is of course self-sufficiency, we find ourselves in unprecedented times.

The last 3 years have seen a great number of shocks across the healthcare system, both in Maine and globally. The recent economic situation has been defined by its tumult. Despite the risks to their person, and alluring benefits packages from our larger health system competitors, many of our dedicated, mission-driven staff have done their best to stick with us and serve our patients throughout this trying time. As members of the same communities we serve, we are acutely aware that our services stand as a lifeline for

many rural peoples. We regularly endure burnout and fatigue, and combined with a challenging labor market, we find ourselves in a terribly tough place.

The bill before you is a small step that can begin to solve our recruitment and retention challenges – in turn allowing us to continue to serve Maine. High staff turnover has been a regular feature of this pandemic era, with early retirements, “job hopping”, and failing recruitment pipelines each contributing to an acute staffing crisis. This all occurs alongside long-predicted healthcare staffing shortages for our state.

I realize how serious these words sound – they are purposefully so, meant to echo the desperation of our human resources staff and our hiring managers. We truly need any and all solutions to be considered if we are to continue to successfully serve. We have already had to cease dental services for one of our two dental centers for several months while recruitment dragged on – and after the sad loss of our only podiatrist on staff, we remain unable to serve our elderly, disabled, and diabetic patients in this important way.

The language of this bill may need some elaboration, but one thing is certain – the definition of “public health worker” *should include all of our Community Health Center staff in Maine*. Loan forgiveness is a significant recruitment and retention tool, and while select clinicians can take advantage of certain federal programs, most of our staff – and especially our non-clinical supporting staff – are not eligible for these. This bill could give local residents the opportunity to also begin serving their neighbors, family, and friends in healthcare service to the public.

Mortgage assistance is another creative way to lure both local and out-of-state jobseekers into the ranks of our health center staff. This would represent a stand-out benefit, situating Maine as a competitive place to live AND work. As you surely know, our housing market has seen the same tumult that the broader economy has experienced. HealthReach has seen several candidates – far along the recruitment process – suddenly back out when they discovered limited local housing was outside their price range. Mortgage assistance could bring more of our scarce housing stock within reach for our future candidates.

On behalf of HealthReach and our 26,000 patients, I thank you for your consideration of this important bill. LD 648 could provide some much-needed relief to our staff, and allow us to continue serving Maine in the way that all Mainers deserve. Please choose to support our local public health workers with this bill. Should you have any questions or seek further insight, please feel free to reach out to me.

**Edward Molleo (he/they)**

***Director of Communications, HealthReach***

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