

State of Maine | 131st Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business
Testimony of Beth Pearce on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association
April 11, 2023

Supporting:
LD 1256, “An Act to Increase Access to Oral Health Care by Expanding the Maine Dental Education Loan Program”

Sponsored by Representative Mastraccio

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business, I am Beth Pearce, Oral Health Program Manager at the Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA).

MPCA is a membership organization that includes all of Maine's 20 Community Health Centers (CHCs), also known as Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). Maine's CHCs make up the largest independent primary care network in the state, providing high quality and equitable primary and preventive medical, behavioral, and dental health services for over 200,000 people (1 in 6 Mainers) at more than 70 service delivery sites in all 16 Maine counties.

Oral health care access in Maine is a priority for MPCA and our Community Health Center Network. As an organization, we are focused on supporting CHCs with the expansion of MaineCare’s comprehensive adult dental benefit. This includes dental assistant training, addressing health equity needs, and ensuring that CHC voices are included at relevant state-level meetings.

As we know, Maine is experiencing workforce shortages in many health care professions, and dental providers are no exception. Rural areas, in particular, are experiencing critical challenges with access to care. As more adults have access to the expanded dental benefits, the health centers’ patient population and the complexity of the patient needs have increased. CHCs are doing everything they can to ensure that patients receive the quality treatment they deserve, but waitlists continue to be long across the state. All efforts that work to find solutions to this dire situation are -appreciated.

Much of our work has been focused on assisting CHCs with the use of dental therapists at their practices. Dental therapists are mid-level providers that can perform both restorative and some extraction procedures. Their work in a dental practice can alleviate the many demands on general dentists, allowing them to focus on the more complex procedures. This leads to each provider type working to the highest scope of their licensure. The first and only dental therapist in Maine is working at a Community Health Center under the supervision of staff dentists. This new staff member has become so important that the health center plans to only hire new general dentists who support this staffing model.

Dentists at Community Health Centers have shared that the Maine Dental Education Loan Program through FAME is a great asset when recruiting Maine dentists to rural areas. Expanding the eligibility to include dental hygienists, dental therapists, dental assistants and expanded function dental assistants would support these efforts and significantly increase access to care.

On behalf of Maine's Community Health Centers, thank you for considering our comments. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly at bpearce@mepca.org with any follow up questions.

Beth Pearce
Oral Health Program Manager
Maine Primary Care Association