

State of Maine | 131st Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services
Testimony of Emily Ferry on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association
April 25, 2023

Supporting:

LD 1506, “Resolve, Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Study the Scarcity of Licensed Clinical Behavioral Health Professionals Across the State”

Sponsored by Representative Sargent

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services, I am Emily Ferry, Director of Workforce Initiatives at 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.

We support LD 1506 and thank Representative Sargent and the other co-sponsors for bringing this bill forward. Ensuring access for behavioral health services remains a priority for MPCA and our Community Health Center Network. Maine is experiencing acute workforce shortages in many health care professions and there is a pronounced need for more mental health professionals across our network. CHCs are doing everything they can to ensure that patients receive the quality treatment they deserve, but more help is needed to address this growing crisis.

In April 2023, there were 29 vacant behavioral health positions across Maine's CHC Network, which includes school-based sites. Our health centers are in dire need of professionals to fill positions such as LCSWs, LCPCs, psychiatric nurse practitioners, psychologists, and substance use disorder (SUD) counselors. It is critical that we address issues related to the recruitment and training of clinical behavioral health professionals to ensure that we are providing the required mental and physical health supports for all Maine people.

We respectfully ask that the Committee consider adding individuals with lived experience navigating access to training and education as members of the stakeholder group. This could include healthcare staff currently interested in career advancement by obtaining a degree or licensure in behavioral health fields, or students and recent graduates. These voices would provide an important perspective on real-world barriers to accessing educational opportunities, costs associated with education programs, and methods to empower individuals to work in the field while attaining a degree or certification.

We also want to note our strong support for the current bill language that requires the stakeholder group to examine “opportunities to count time working in the field toward attaining an advanced degree or certification.” There are current behavioral health staff, such as case managers, SUD counselors, and behavioral health support specialists, who are not licensed as behavioral health professionals, but their job requirements have them doing extensive work in this field. When they seek an advanced degree or licensure in the behavioral health field, years of field experience are not

accounted for, despite the tremendous amount of lived experience they already have accumulated. This barrier can be a deterrent for many individuals interested in career advancement.

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

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