



**Testimony of Vanessa Santarelli, CEO
Maine Primary Care Association**

**In Support of LD 1301: “An Act to Improve Access to Preventive, Cost-Saving Dental Services”
April 21, 2017**

Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Vanessa Santarelli and I serve as CEO for the Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA), whose members include all 20 of the state’s Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), which provide high quality, affordable and integrated primary and preventive care services for over 210,000 individuals (or 1 in every 6 Mainers). I am pleased to offer testimony in support of LD 1301 on their behalf.

In February, Judy Pulsifer, one of Sacopec Valley Health Center’s patients, spoke about how critical it is for low income adults to have affordable access to preventive dental services. She had just turned 65 and had this to say:

“I am on a very fixed income, and as a senior, Medicare won’t cover the cost of most dental care. Fortunately for me, the Sacopec Valley Health Center allows me to receive dental services on a sliding fee scale. My copay is \$10, which may not sound like a lot to some of you, but I can barely afford that.I understand that many other Community Health Centers around the state also offer their patients access to affordable dental services-which are critically needed. I had always brushed my teeth, however, I never had dental coverage in my life until Sacopec hired Dr. Adeloys and opened their dental practice. But, we all know that brushing your teeth can only do so much.....without proper annual cleanings, education about the importance of oral hygiene, and the ability to get cavities treated, a bad situation can get much, much worse. It can even get so severe that you can end up in the hospital.

I was embarrassed for my first appointment with Sacopec’s dentist because I had two teeth missing. Self-esteem is directly tied to your smile and I was always reluctant to do so because of the gaps in mine. But, Dr. Adeloys was amazing.....he actually built me teeth to fill in the missing space, and they actually look like my real teeth. I am so proud of my new smile.”

Judy’s story is not unique, and she is fortunate to be a patient at one of Maine’s FQHCs that offers integrated preventive dental services to low income adults. However, many more of our members would be in a position to offer these essential services if you enact LD 1301. Last year alone, Maine’s FQHCs, provided over \$2.6 million in uncompensated dental care to their patients. This is unsustainable. More to the point, consider how many more dentists and hygienists they could hire, and how many more patients they could provide low-cost dental screenings, cleanings and other services to if they were able to get reimbursed through an adult dental benefit under the MaineCare Program.

32 other states in the country offer a similar benefit, and the continued rise in Emergency Department visits related to dental issues is not just concerning, it is costly. According to the American Dental Association, the average cost for a teeth cleaning for adults is \$82.08, and \$146.61 for an amalgam filling in a permanent tooth, whereas the average cost of an Emergency Department visit is \$978. It is clear that making an investment in primary and preventive oral health services would produce long-term savings from reduced hospitalizations and ED visits, in the same way that investments in primary medical care have over time.

Access to dental services is not simply a health care issue, it is also an economic one, as the testimony in support of this bill from the Maine State Chamber of Commerce points out. People need confidence when seeking employment, which includes a healthy smile. In my professional life working for MPCA and the Maine Department of Labor, I have spoken to many individuals who had missing teeth or other adverse oral health issues because of a lack of coverage, who felt embarrassed when interviewing for jobs, or greeting customers once employed. Nobody should be in that position, and this bill will help address the needs of Maine's workers and future workforce.

Finally, in addition to all of the reasons noted above and by the previous speakers, there is legal precedent for passing LD 1301. The 9th Circuit Court recently ruled that the federal Medicaid Act requires states to cover FQHC and RHC services, including those performed by dentists. Attached is a white paper prepared by our attorneys at Kozak and Gayer with an analysis of the MaineCare program in relation to the court's decision. While the court ruled that only FQHCs and RHCs would be eligible for reimbursement of adult dental services, we believe the Legislature should pass LD 1301 that would guarantee that any dental practice that provides services to adults covered under the MaineCare Program should receive the same level of reimbursement.

Given the many compelling reasons why this bill should be enacted into law, we strongly urge you to unanimously pass LD 1301. Thank you for your consideration.