



**Testimony of Jess Maurer on Behalf of
the Maine Council on Aging
To Committee on Health and Human Services**

**In Favor of LD 315 –
An Act to Promote Healthy Living in Maine**

Delivered on April 3, 2019

Greetings Senator Gratwick, Representative Hymanson and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Jess Maurer and I'm the Executive Director of the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA). The MCOA is a broad, multidisciplinary network of more than 80 organizations, businesses, municipalities and older Mainers working together to make sure we all live healthy, engaged, and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age in our homes and communities. I am providing testimony in favor of LD 315.

A person reaching the age of 65 years today can expect to live another 20 years. Maintaining good health in our later years ensures our ability to live active and engaged lives and to contribute fully to our families, work and communities. In order to live healthy and productive lives long into old age, we must be able to access proven health prevention and maintenance programs where or near where we live. Unfortunately, tens of thousands of older Mainers who struggle to manage their chronic conditions like diabetes and arthritis and who experience frequent falls do not currently have access to proven evidence-based programs that could help them live healthier lives.

Over the past 15 years, several evidence-based programs have been developed to help people effectively self-manage chronic conditions, avoid falls and injuries, and maintain and improve healthy behaviors. These include programs like Tai Chi for Health & Balance, A Matter of Balance, Walk With Ease, Living Well for Better Health, Living Well with Diabetes and many others. Older people attending these programs in Maine have had great success in achieving better health.

Evidence-based programs are essential for healthy aging. Older people are disproportionately affected by chronic conditions, such as diabetes, arthritis, and heart disease. 80% of older people have at least one chronic condition, and nearly 70% of Medicare beneficiaries have two or more. Chronic diseases can limit a person's ability to perform daily activities and cause them to need long-term services and supports.

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Falls are the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries among older people. A quarter of older people fall each year, with 20% of all falls result in serious injury. Nationally, we spend \$50 billion a year treating older people for the effects of falls. Fear of falling can lead older people to limit their activities, which can result in more falls, further physical decline, depression, and social isolation.

While Maine's area agencies on aging, health systems and senior centers have done a tremendous job of bringing evidence-based programming to some older people in some parts of Maine, the reality is that there is not sufficient funding to build a network of providers who could ensure that older people can access these health promoting programs in every part of Maine. LD 315 would go a long way to ensuring more access across the state.

Providing local programming in all parts of Maine is critically important because too many older people in Maine also struggle with accessing transportation and driving. While they may feel comfortable driving a few miles to town to access what they need, they are unwilling to make longer journeys unless it's absolutely necessary. Certainly, if they're reliant on others for rides, they will not ask a person to make a long trip for this kind of activity. Thus, older people in remote parts of Maine are less likely to be able to gain access to these kinds of health-promoting evidence-based programs.

I want to offer a personal story to underscore the importance of these programs to ensuring the future productivity of older people in our communities. A man retired to my community after a long and productive career as a nuclear engineer. For both the military and private companies, he ensured the safety of nuclear power plants across the world. In retirement, his sole mission was to create a volunteer home repair project that would help older people remain safe, warm and dry at home.

He followed his dream, and at 80 now leads a team of 26 guys who do one home repair job a week in Harpswell. They've repaired more than 65 homes in our town over the last couple years. He's a true inspiration. However, he struggles with balance problems and was falling frequently. Thankfully, our town connected with Southern Maine Agency on Aging to bring Tai Chi for Health & Balance to our town office. He participated in two multi-week classes, strengthened his core, gained better balance, and got new skills he uses to maintain his balance. He is falling much less often and is more confident in his movement. We need him, and everyone like him, to be fully engaged in our communities and should make sure all older people have meaningful access to these kinds of programs.

We urge your vote in favor of LD 315. Thank you.

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