



Testimony of Jess Maurer on Behalf of
The Maine Council on Aging
To the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations
& Health & Human Services

In Favor of LD 221 – 2021-2023 Biennial Budget

Submitted in Person on February 17, 2021

Greetings Senators Breen and Claxton, Representatives Pierce and Myer, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and 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 100 organizations, businesses, municipalities and older community members working to ensure we can all live healthy, engaged and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age at home and in community settings. I am testifying in favor of LD 221, although we are urging amendments to this bill to include necessary investments in the infrastructure that supports healthy aging.

There are three things on which we all agree. One is that we want Maine to have a strong economy and a bright future. The next is that justice demands that wrongs be made right. Finally, we believe that Mainers lead, that we are able to solve any problem when we're working together. This is certainly why our state motto is Dirigo!

I want to start on this issue of justice. We can all agree that if people are being harmed by collective forces outside of their individual control, we must act to address the harm. I am here today to ask you to right the harm being done to too many older Mainers who are not getting the care they are eligible to receive, putting the long term health of our economy at risk.

We had hoped the Governor's Biennial Budget would contain significant investments in Maine's care workforce – a workforce that fuels a significant portion of our economy. We had also hoped that the budget would address significant waitlists for two of the lowest cost/highest value supports we have – Home and Community Support Services and the Homemaker Program. Finally, we wanted to see increased funding for Meals on Wheels, the lowest cost program that yields big returns by keeping homebound older people out of the hospital and nursing homes.

Unfortunately, this budget does little to improve the lives of older Mainers who are struggling every day to meet their basic needs and access the care and supports they not only need, but are entitled to receive. We urge you, therefore, to consider amendments to this budget that would, at a minimum, make significant investments in Maine's essential care workforce, address the waitlists for existing programs, and include funding to ensure older homebound Mainers can keep their life-sustaining meals coming.

Here is why I need you to act for justice:

Each week, there are thousands of unstaffed hours of care for Maine's most vulnerable older and disabled Mainers. Last week, 9,443 hours of approved care by Personal Support Specialists went undelivered to 857 people, including 538 older Mainers who received no staffing at all. Most of the people who are not getting these services are nursing home eligible.

There are 1,000 people waiting to access the Homemaker program. In addition, out of 1,650 current Homemaker clients, 250 clients have no staffing at all. Due to COVID and other factors, the program has dropped from 120 workers into the 90's.

Nearly 800 older people are waiting to access Home and Community Support Services. This is a state-funded program, and when the allocated money is spent, people go onto a waitlist. Currently, the waitlist has grown higher than the actual number of people being served, meaning without additional funding, it's unlikely the people waiting for services will ever get them.

During COVID-19, thousands of new home-bound older Mainers began receiving home delivered meals. Two-thirds of the new recipients actually qualify for the program. Sometime later this year, we will tell these new recipients who qualify for the program that they will no longer be getting meals because the CARES Act money has run out.

There are empty beds in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, while we warehouse older people in hospitals who cannot be discharged to home or to a facility due to staffing shortages.

I am regularly fielding calls from geriatricians, housing coordinators, family members, and others, all imploring me to help find care for their patients, residents, and loved ones. The Long Term Care Ombudsman's Office is doing all they can, but they also cannot find workers or placements for older people in this situation.

Every one of us have thoughts about how we want to grow old. I am certain we all want a different reality than the one I just described. However, until we build that new reality – until we invest in a different vision of what it means to grow old in Maine, this is what far too many of us have to look forward to for ourselves and our family members.

The 2020 Long Term Supports and Services (LTSS) Scorecard, ranks Maine 44th in the nation for affordability and accessibility. We rank 47th in relation to the median annual nursing home private pay cost as a percentage of median household income for ages 65+, and 50th for median annual home care private pay cost as a percentage of median household income for ages 65+.

This report tells us what we already knew, the cost of LTSS in Maine exceeds the budgets of most Maine households. So, our current situation isn't about people not working hard enough, or not saving enough money, or a family not stepping up to help – this is about Maine's workforce crisis, an historically undervalued segment of workers in our economy, and an historic lack of investments in low-costs interventions that support healthy aging. These are problems no one individual can solve. Justice demands, however, that when we know people are going without the services they are qualified to receive and need to receive in order to live, we act to correct the harm being caused.

Here's the root of the problem. We live in a market driven economy. When we don't have enough workers, the private market corrects, paying more for workers, and passing higher costs on to consumers. When government pays less than market rate for services, this puts businesses

that rely on government contracts at a competitive disadvantage – they cannot pay premium wages to workers, and thus, cannot maintain an adequate workforce capable of meeting the current demand for services.

Currently, our care providers are serving all of the people they can with the funding being provided; they are employing all the people they are going to employ without additional funding. This means older people will simply go without care unless we increase funding for essential care workers. These increases must be across the board, for all essential care workers, in all settings, not just in long term care. We must stop pitting different types of service providers against one another and must start valuing the people who provide this care in the same way.

It's important to bring the issue of equity into this conversation. The integral role of the care economy has largely been ignored by economic policymakers. A large part of this is due to who provides care and who they provide care to. Historically in this country, the kind of care we're talking about was the work of slaves and immigrants, and always dominated by women. Today, it remains a workforce dominated by women, still often women of color and women new to this country. We must also tell the truth about the value of the people receiving care. Older people in nursing homes, or who cannot get out of bed on their own, and people with severe disabilities or behavioral health challenges who have the same needs, are not valued in our society as productive. We have an undervalued group of people caring for another undervalued group of people. We must consider these equity issues, and our own internal biases about the people receiving care, in our decision-making processes.

Our current economic challenges offer us an opportunity to build a different Maine with this new budget. I am not economist, but I have read enough to know that many economists believe a significant investment in our social infrastructure, i.e. the care economy, during a time of economic downturn and high unemployment, has the potential to create thousands of good paying, quality jobs. This sort of investment also has the potential of narrowing gender and racial pay gaps, addressing historic inequities, and expanding overall household income.

Critically important, investing to ensure everyone who qualifies for care gets good, quality care, pays dividends. We know Meals on Wheels and in-home care increases health and reduces avoidable healthcare and facility care utilization, both the most expensive kinds of care we have. We can invest now and save later, building a vibrant, healthy workforce and economy along the way.

Which brings me back to our state motto. The challenges that come with evolving systems to the meet the changing needs of a population and to right historical wrongs, all in the face of a pandemic, can feel overwhelming. However, Mainers have never shied away from hard work, and have almost always seen the opportunity in the challenges we face. I ask you to work together to build an equitable and just budget that shows the innovative confidence we Mainers have in our ability to solve challenges. I have absolute faith in your abilities.

With these requests for amendments, I urge the Committee to vote in favor of LD 221.

Thank you.
Jess Maurer, Esq.
207-592-9972