



**Testimony of Kathy Vezina on Behalf of
The Maine Council on Aging
To the Joint Standing Committee on
Appropriations & Financial Affairs**

**In Favor of LD 1733 – “An Act To Provide
Allocation for the Distribution of State Fiscal
Recovery Funds”**

Submitted in Person on June 9, 2021

Greetings Senator Breen, Representative Pierce, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs.

My name is Kathy Vezina and I’m the Policy Director for 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. We are in favor of LD 1733, although we urge amendments to this bill.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) is intended to respond to the impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the public health and economic impacts.

As of May 26, 2021, 579,029 Americans have lost their lives to COVID-19. People over 65 account for 462,070, or 80% of all deaths. There can be no doubt that older Americans suffered the brunt of this pandemic, not just through illness and death, but through increased isolation, loss of productivity through work and volunteerism, and, for some, loss of rights. Yet, the needs of the population who experienced the biggest impact of COVID-19 are invisible in LD 1733. While there are many other needs, including structural funding for Meals on Wheels in our biennial budget to meet increased demand during COVID-19, I will focus entirely on our Essential Support Workforce crisis.

COVID-19 exacerbated an already significant crisis in Maine’s Essential Support Workforce shortage, and our long term support system for people of all kinds, in all settings, is now at the brink of collapse.

Essential Support Workers are people, almost all women, and often women of color, who work in home and community-based settings who provide vital assistance and daily support with core aspects of life to tens of thousands of older people, people who have physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, and people with behavioral health challenges.

Too many of these workers were left out in cold during COVID-19. They were not prioritized for PPE or vaccinations; they received no hero pay or special recognition. Yet, they went to work every day to protect the people they support, putting themselves and their families at risk and getting paid less than they could make at jobs in fast food and retail.

These workers are tired. They are tired of being undervalued, underpaid, and underappreciated. They are leaving this workforce in droves for higher paying, less demanding jobs. Low MaineCare reimbursement rates make it impossible for providers to pay more to retain these workers, or to compete for replacement workers in our tight labor market. In fact, when workers leave, it's now nearly impossible for providers to replace those workers.

This crisis results in thousands of vulnerable people not getting the support they are entitled to receive, which has a devastating impact on these people, their families, and our economy.

For instance, each and every week, 10,000 hours of approved home care goes undelivered to more than 800 older and disabled people who are nursing home eligible through Section 19. The number of unstaffed hours has doubled over the past five years. We are constantly hearing from people all over Maine who cannot find home care workers. The situation has gone beyond crisis. We've attached the testimony of Yvonne Davis to highlight the current problems.

Section 19 offers home care as an alternative to nursing home care to eligible members, who are older and disabled people. Since January of this year, the Section 19 census has declined by more than 100 people, which is unusual. 66 of these members moved into higher costing nursing home care. The others died. These 66 people had the right to community integration.

980 older and disabled people are waiting to access Section 63/Chapter 11 home care. This waitlist started only a few months into COVID-19, and continues to grow steadily each month. These people have been determined eligible for services but there is no funding for the services. These people will likely need nursing home care if they cannot get home care.

Every worker is precious in our current workforce shortage. 39% of family caregivers leave their job to take care of an adult relative. While Maine is rightly investing in child care, we're failing our workers by not investing in the same supports for adults. Women are more likely to leave the workforce to care for an adult relative and are bearing the burden of our lack of child care and adult supports.

Over the last decade, advocates have been advocating for dramatically increase reimbursement rates for Essential Support Workers to prevent system failure. We were told there was no money; we were told we had to work together to create a pathway forward on rate issues. We are all standing together now – in support of LD 1573 – and there is plenty of money. So, we must ask, if not now, when?

When will we strengthen Maine's Essential Support Workforce? When will we recognize the impact of sexism, racism, ableism, and ageism on how we value this workforce? When will we ensure family caregivers can access both child care and care for adults so they can stay in the workforce? When will we ensure older people, people who have physical, intellectual, or

developmental disabilities, and people with behavioral health challenges can live their most productive lives by getting the support they need in the least restrictive environments?

The State Fiscal Recovery Fund is intended to be used to provide assistance to households and small and nonprofit businesses; to aid affected industries; and help workers who were performing essential work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, we urge amendments to LD 1733 in the following ways to address this crisis:

Sec. 1, Subsection 1, include a Subpart G that reads, “Invest in Maine’s Essential Support Workforce” and include a definition of this workforce as found in LD 1573.

Sec. 1, Subsection 2, Subpart B, include a Paragraph 7 that reads, “Implement the recommendation of the Commission to Study Long Term Care Workforce Issues”.

Sec. 1, Subsection 3, Subpart A, include a Paragraph 5 that reads, “Expanding the availability of supports and services for older adults, adults with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities, and people with behavioral health challenges”.

We are at a perfect moment to make significant investments in Maine’s Essential Support Workforce, an investment that is good for Maine’s people, workforce, and economy, and specifically addresses the impact COVID-19 has had on this industry.

We urge this Committee to authorize the use ARPA funds to eliminate waitlists for services, and to increase reimbursement rates for all Essential Support Workers in Maine. We understand this is one-time money and these actions would obligate the state for future funding. But ARPA funds are exactly intended for this purpose – to be a bridge to recovery so that states have time to plan for the kinds of investments they will need to make in the future.

To that end, we urge you to establish a Commission to Study & Recommend Funding Solutions to Maine’s Growing Personal Support Workforce Shortage to find a permanent solution. Modeled on the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission Transportation Funding Commission, the commission would study how to reform and adequately supplement funding for Maine’s Essential Support Workforce infrastructure to promote equity, sustainability and predictability in the delivery of personal support.

When President Biden announced the ARPA, he said it was so we could “build back better.” Maine can build back better by strengthening its Essential Support Workforce, eliminating wait lists, supporting family caregivers, and ensuring the rights of MaineCare members are protected. In doing this, we can address long-standing inequities that impact women, particularly women of color, and the vulnerable people they serve. The time to act is now to build a better Maine.

Thank you.

Kathy Vezina