



**Written Testimony of Jess Maurer on Behalf of  
The Maine Council on Aging  
To Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing**

**In Favor of LD 786 – Resolve, Requiring the Departments of  
Labor and Education to Create an Educational Program for  
Direct Care Workers**

Testimony Provided on May 5, 2021

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing:

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 writing in support of LD 786.

The MCOA proposed legislation to create the Commission in December 2016, after a significant stakeholder process identified a multitude of ways in which Maine needed to systematically address its severe and pervasive direct care workforce shortage. While the Commission was created pursuant to LD 925, enacted in July of 2018, the Commission failed to meet before the end of the session, and needed to be re-authorized in 2019 before it could begin its work. The Commission met in the fall of 2019 and issued its report in December of that year.

As you know, COVID hit in 2020, and we had to postpone the critical conversation about solving our direct care worker shortage. The COVID crisis has made it even more important to invest in promoting and building a quality essential care workforce ready to meet Maine's care needs. This is because many care professionals have left the profession during the pandemic.

Over the many months the Commission met, members heard considerable testimony from employers across this continuum, employers who employ nearly 30,000 workers collectively, that they are about to fail if reimbursement rates are not immediately increased to allow them to adequately compete for qualified workers. They heard that each week in Maine, 10,000 hours of approved care goes undelivered to Section 19 older and disabled adults because of the direct care workforce shortage. They heard that in the last 90 days, 60% of Maine's assisted living facilities and nursing homes declined a new admission because of staffing shortages. They heard that older people are experiencing unnecessarily long stays in hospitals, filling critically needed beds, because they cannot be discharged to home or facilities because of these staffing shortages.

The Commission heard over and over again that there are three critical components to building a sustainable care workforce. These involve creating a reliable pipeline of workers into the field, creating opportunity for advancement within the field and to other health care positions, and creating quality jobs that include livable wages, benefits and quality supervision and support.

This bill specifically addresses the first challenge – the pipeline into the field. Two key issues related to people entering the field are that they have expectations about the work that don't meet the realities of the work, and that they need to earn a living while they are in training. Providers across sectors underscored that workers providing care at home need opportunities to “earn while they learn” and to be mentored in the positions.

The Commission's Report recommends that the Legislature “Direct the Department of Labor to work with the Department of Education, Maine's institutes of higher education, and Maine's Career and Technical Education Centers to develop and target education and certification programs for direct care workers, including high school vocational education programs including the following:

- Apprenticeship programs for direct care workers;
- "Earn as you learn" programs for direct care workers; and
- Pre-apprenticeship program for Maine's Career and Technical Education Centers”

LD 786 operationalizes the intent of this recommendation, although it does not address apprenticeship programs. Under this bill, the resources and expertise of the Departments of Labor and Education are drawn together in the development of educational programming with transferable skills for essential care workers. A common curriculum that are accessible in a variety of settings, both in-person and online, will allow workers to gain certifications, transfer more easily between different parts of the essential care sector, and begin to develop a career providing essential services for people in need of these supports. A program that allows learners to work and earn money in the field while learning makes it financially possible for more people to move into these essential care jobs.

This strategy alone is not the entire answer to the growing problem of the direct care workforce shortage, but it is an important part of the solution. Unless we attract new people to the field, then educate and retain them, more and more of Maine's most vulnerable people will be unable to get the support they need to meet their basic human needs.

Our care problem is not going away. More than 300,000 people in Maine are over 65. A quarter of them will need more than one year of *paid* support over the remainder of their lifetime. Many people with disabilities old and young need assistance with activities of daily living to get going in the morning, to get going to jobs, caring for grandkids, or volunteering to help others. Investing in this workforce now ensures Mainers will be able to get the help they need to be as productive as they can be for as long as they can be, despite their need for care.

We urge you to vote in favor of LD 786. Thank you.