



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

**In Favor of Proposed Amendments to LD 898 – An Act to
Create the Essential Support Workforce Advisory Committee**

Submitted in Person on January 31, 2022

Senator Daughtry, 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 130 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. The MCOA is in support of the proposed amendment to LD 898.

Maine's essential support workforce is complex. Workers in this field provide support with instrumental/activities of daily living to older people, people with disabilities, and people with behavioral health challenges. They provide these services in the person's home or in facilities. These workers provide the same care regardless of who is paying— the person, MaineCare, Veteran's Administration, or another payer source. Providers get reimbursed from tens of different sections of MaineCare, different statutes via the general fund, and through private pay. This last part is critical – there is a significant shortage of home care workers even for people who can pay out-of-pocket for these services. This means this is an issue for the public, not just providers, when we're talking about the need to access information.

Last year, for the first time, the Legislature recognized this labor force as one labor force, not disjointed parts working for different populations in different settings. It also recognized that this labor force is woefully inadequate to meet existing demand for support services, and took action to implement some, but not all, of the recommendations of the Commission to Study Long Term Care Workforce Issues (the Commission).

As a reminder, in any given week, about 10,000 hours of approved care by Personal Support Specialists go undelivered to about 850 older and disabled Mainers, including more than 500 older Mainers who received no staffing at all. These are not people on a wait list – these are people who are supposed to be getting care, who are not getting any care because there are no workers. This 10,000 hour deficit has more than doubled since 2016, and shows no sign of slowing. These people are nursing home eligible. This is only one tiny slice of the overall

Essential Support Workforce, and the lack of homecare and nursing home staffing has resulted in hundreds of people being kept in hospitals weekly because they cannot be discharged to home or facilities due to lack of staffing.

Since the spring of 2020, the state, through the actions of many state agencies including the Departments of Labor, Health & Human Services, and Economic and Community Development, has been acting diligently to address the Essential Support Workforce crisis and to implement many of the recommendations of the Commission. While they have made great progress on numerous initiatives, most of these initiatives have not actually launched or are just launching, and thus have not yet had much impact on the crisis. More importantly, besides providing updates when asked to by various groups, there is not one central location where anyone can find periodic updated information about the work being completed, who to contact with questions, how to be involved, or what the impact has been, etc.

The amendment to LD 898 is exactly what is needed in this moment to make progress in addressing this workforce crisis. It proposes to create an Essential Support Workforce Advisory Committee that would receive quarterly updates on progress on implementing workforce initiatives, collaborate on research needed to understand staffing levels and increasing demand, monitor the growth of the workforce, make recommendations about additional actions needed, and address the benefits cliff issue.

One of the recommendations of the Commission's report was to create an Oversight Committee to ensure compliance with the recommendations and track unstaffed hours and on-going worker demand. Over the past year, it has become increasingly clear that some sort of an advisory committee is needed so that interested parties and the public can gain consistent and regular access to the same information about what is happening to solve this crisis and what progress is being made, and to offer on-going insight and advice as to what else still needs to happen.

While action is important, to understand if we're making progress, we need additional research to determine metrics of progress. We don't know how many workers are in this workforce, how many more workers are needed just to meet current unmet demand, how many more are needed to meet expected increases in demand, the number of people in hospitals due to lack of home care/facility beds, and what the unmet demand is for private pay home and facility care (lack of care means workers are leaving the workforce to provide informal care to family members, deepening our workforce shortage).

Finally, this bill still focuses on the benefits cliff, but instead of the technical proposal brought to this Committee last year, the current amendment proposes that the Advisory Committee develop and recommend a pilot that addresses this issue. While we appreciate the Department's current proposal to help TANF recipients navigate to careers, this doesn't address the very real problem they face of losing all of their benefits and subsidies once they start earning too much. There are hundreds of workers in this workforce who could work more hours, immediately staffing hundreds more people. We must do something to actually help them work more hours.

We urge you to vote in favor of LD 898 as amended. Thank you.

Jess Maurer