



**Testimony of Jena Jones on Behalf of
the Maine Council on Aging to the Committee on
Health and Human Services**

**In Favor of LD 1339 - Resolve, to Establish the
Task Force to Study Forming the Maine Commission
on Disabilities**

Delivered on April 18, 2023

Greetings, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and the members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Jena Jones, and I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA). The MCOA is a broad, multidisciplinary network of over 135 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 1339.

According to U.S. State Profile Data, 1 in 4 people in Maine have a disability.¹ That statistic represents over 300,000 people across our state, more than 90,000 of them over 65. Many of these people have been historically disenfranchised and shut out of systems and opportunities throughout their lives, and still suffer discrimination and disregard.

Ableism is alive and well in our culture. We see it when we look to the invisible: the lack of proper investment in a care infrastructure to support people with disabilities; a lack of investment in and availability of paratransit services, on-going bias and discrimination in employment, and a built environment constructed without an eye to accessibility.

The oversight and opportunity for inquiry that a commission provides will create a process for answering questions that demand attention. We currently know that there are Mainers with disabilities who are entitled to direct care services, but we cannot say how many people are without care nor can we say how many hours these people are owed. We understand there are swaths of the state where people cannot find care and support services because there are literally no workers, but we do not know where the geographic boundaries of these so-called “care deserts” are, and we know many people with disabilities do not know what services are available to assist them living fully engaged lives.

¹ (Bureau, 2022)

The Commission established in LD 1339 establishes a holistic scope to consider the many ways the state can ensure people with disabilities have the ability to live a life with autonomy, choice, and opportunity in their homes, communities, and natural spaces. Approaching the Commission's work through the lens of accessibility and inclusivity with further needed efforts toward an equitable Maine.

It is critical that state agencies work together to solve challenges for people with disabilities, and this work must be informed by the lived experience of people with disabilities. We encourage the Committee to accept a friendly amendment which is to include both the Department of Agriculture and UMaine's Cooperative Extension Service on the Commission. The latter runs Maine AgrAbility, a program that helps farmers, fishers, and forest workers work safely with a disability. As Maine's farmers, fishers and forest workers age, the tools offered through this program can help extend the time these workers can continue to work.

The MCOA urges this committee to support the efforts of LD 1339.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.

Jena Jones