

Testimony in Support of LD 996
From Maine Council of Churches
April 26, 2021

Senator Ned Claxton, Representative Michele Meyer and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Evelyn Johnson Moore. I am a United Methodist and live in Wells. I write as the co-chair of the Public Policy Committee of the Maine Council of Churches. The Maine Council of Churches supports **LD 996 “An Act to Improve Dental Health Access for Maine Children and Adults with Low Incomes”**.

The Maine Council of Churches represents seven denominations statewide which includes 437 churches with a total membership of more than 55,000 members. Although our faith expressions can differ, we stand united that the dignity of the human person shapes the foundation for our public policy positions. We believe this God-given dignity flows with human rights and human responsibilities. We unanimously hold that health care is a human right. It is not a luxury giving market forces the role as gatekeeper to adequate health care. We all have a right to basic health care. We all have a responsibility to advocate for others excluded from accessing care, and we all have a responsibility to take preventative measures for our own personal care as much as possible.

For too long, dental care has been considered extraneous to basic health care. But common sense tells us that care for teeth and gums has significant impact on the rest of our bodies. Our coalition partners on this legislation have identified important research on the impact lack of dental care has on total physical health. We have studied their research and find the results compelling. But we also witness this impact on families and households in our congregations and in the communities where churches and worship sites are located.

When poor people have no access to dental services, treatable illnesses are neglected, often deteriorating into more serious diseases accompanied by infections. Hospital Emergency Rooms then become their only option with more expensive treatments and at times irreversible damage. Missing or damaged teeth also present an unnecessary hurdle to getting hired for a job. So many jobs available in their communities are service-related such as store clerks, restaurant workers, and office receptionists.

Employers are understandably hesitant to hire someone with visible oral diseases, but so many with serious dental issues are too embarrassed to apply in the first place. Removing such barriers helps move people into good-paying jobs and better able to provide for their family needs. Obviously, this also greatly impacts self-confidence and self-esteem.

Reducing Emergency Room visits and increasing the pool of eligible workers are only two positive outcomes from this legislation. Access to proper dental care reduces stress and anxiety of living with constant pain as dental illnesses progress. Their sense of isolation brought on by constant pain and embarrassment also melts away allowing folks to become more a part of community life. This benefits everyone in the municipality where they live and becomes good for our state.

We strongly support LD 996 and urge this committee to report “Ought to Pass” to the Senate and House of Representatives. Thank you for your work promoting the health care and well-being of Maine people.