

Testimony in support of LD 199, “An Act to Improve the Health of Maine Residents by Removing Exclusions to the MaineCare Program”

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James Myall, Economic Policy Analyst

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is James Myall. I’m an Economic Policy Analyst for the Maine Center on Economic Policy. I’m here before you today to testify in support of LD 199, “An Act to Improve the Health of Maine Residents by Removing Exclusions to the MaineCare Program.”

All Mainers need access to affordable health care, no matter where they were born or how they came to our state. This bill would provide critical support for many New Mainers as they begin a life in this country, making them healthier and more economically secure, and in the process bolstering our economy and helping us all thrive.

LD 199 would ensure that certain groups of immigrants who are currently excluded from Medicaid by federal law are covered through state funds. This use of state funds is not only a moral imperative, but also a smart choice which will benefit us all in the long-term. The Legislature recognized that in the last budget cycle when it ensured that all children and pregnant people would be covered, regardless of their immigration status. It’s time to finish the job and make sure no-one is left behind.

Being without health care coverage is an extremely difficult experience and puts people in the impossible decision of trying to choose between paying for their health and other necessities like groceries or rent. This is especially true of the most vulnerable Mainers who are already trying to make do with very little resources. And while people may have access to emergency MaineCare or free care through a hospital system, those safety nets do not cover many fundamental health care costs like preventative care, check-ups, tests, or prescription drugs. In the past decade, a huge body of research has shown that expanded access to Medicaid for low-income individuals in dozens of states has resulted in overall better health. Researchers have found that Medicaid coverage has resulted in fewer deaths from diseases like cancer, heart disease and liver disease. It has meant better treatment for conditions like diabetes. It’s also resulted in more access to mental health and substance use treatment, as well as preventative services like reproductive health.¹

We also know that this initiative will benefit those of us who aren’t directly impacted. From a public health standpoint, the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced how much our healthiness is connected to the wellbeing of others. Making sure that everyone has access to testing, vaccination, and treatment will reduce the circulation of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases in the community at large.

Health care is also an economic issue. Not only does having access to affordable health care mean these Mainers will be better off individually, their economic security will benefit all of us. For example, it’s far more cost-effective to provide MaineCare coverage to individuals so that they can get regular diagnostic and preventative care, than it is for them to rely on emergency and charitable care. Again, Maine’s experience with broader Medicaid expansion has shown this –

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hospital costs for charitable care and uncollectable debts have both fallen as a result of more people having access to MaineCare.

Healthy Mainers are also productive Mainers. By assisting these New Mainers with access to health care, we will be ensuring that they are able to contribute to our collective well-being to their fullest extent, whether that's through working, or through equally valuable unpaid activities like volunteering and caring.² Poor health is a leading cause of Mainers not being able to work or to working less than full time, and access to health care is an economic imperative. And New Mainers are especially likely to work in key sectors of Maine's economy such as in tourism, at hospitals, and in direct care work.

And where Mainers are able to work, they contribute additional tax revenues. A relatively small state investment now will be more than repaid over the lifetime earnings of these Mainers. Overall, immigrants currently contribute nearly \$200 million in state and local taxes in Maine each year.³

This bill would correct an injustice. It would ensure that health care is available to Mainers regardless of where they were born or how they came to this country. It will help the economic security of hundreds, improving their health and their lives more broadly. What's more, it will improve the health and economy of our society as a whole. It represents both the morally right thing to do and a smart use of state tax dollars. I urge you to vote "ought to pass."

Thank you. I'll be happy to take any questions.

Notes

¹ For a review of the hundreds of studies on this topic, see Madeleine Guth, Rachel Garfield, and Robin Rudowitz, "The Effects of Medicaid Expansion under the ACA: Studies from January 2014 to January 2020." *Kaiser Family Foundation*, Mar 17, 2020. <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/report/the-effects-of-medicaid-expansion-under-the-aca-updated-findings-from-a-literature-review/> and Madeline Guth and Meghana Ammula, "Building on the Evidence Base: Studies on the Effects of Medicaid Expansion, February 2020 to March 2021." *Kaiser Family Foundation*. May 6, 2021. <https://www.kff.org/report-section/building-on-the-evidence-base-studies-on-the-effects-of-medicaid-expansion-february-2020-to-march-2021-report/>

² For an example, see Thomas Buchmueller, Helen Levy and Robert Valletta, "Medicaid Expansion And The Unemployed," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 26553. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26553/w26553.pdf

³ MECEP calculation using US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2017-2021, 5-year data. See also https://maineequaljustice.org/site/assets/files/3397/ld_199_2023_fact_sheet.pdf