



SUIT UP MAINE

April 25, 2021

Sen. Claxton, Rep. Meyer, and honorable members of the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Kelli Whitlock Burton and I am a resident of Waldoboro and co-leader of Suit Up Maine, an independent, all-volunteer constituent action group representing more than 5,000 Mainers in all 16 counties. I offer this testimony in support of LD 996, “An Act To Improve Dental Health for Maine Children and Adults with Low Incomes.”

While MaineCare provides preventive dental care for children, ours is one of just 10 state Medicaid programs to offer emergency-only coverage for adults. LD 996 would change that by adding preventive, diagnostic, and restorative dental services for adults 21 years and older.

Dental disease was the most common reason for ER visits for Mainers aged 15-44 who receive MaineCare or who are uninsured.¹ According to the American Dental Association, 1 in 5 low-income Mainers say their mouth and teeth are in poor condition and that the appearance of their teeth has negatively impacted their performance in job interviews. More than 40% of those Mainers have trouble biting or chewing and 45% experience dental pain occasionally or very often. Nearly 80% of low-income Mainers expect to lose teeth with age compared to just 42% of those with higher incomes. And 64% of those who failed to seek dental care in the previous year cited cost as the reason.²

¹ Kilbreth B, et. al. Analysis of Emergency Department Use in Maine: A Study Conducted on Behalf of the Emergency Department Use Work Group of the Maine Advisory Council on Health System Development. 2010 January. <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/Publications/PHHP/Maine-Emergency-Department-Use.pdf>

² Oral Health and Well-Being in Maine. Health Policy Institute, American Dental Association. <https://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/OralHealthWell-Being-StateFacts/Maine-Oral-Health-Well-Being.pdf>

Research suggests that preventive dental care is far less expensive than emergency treatment and can improve overall health.³ In fact, an analysis by the Health Policy Institute suggests that within 3 years of passage, LD 996 could result in a savings of nearly \$4 million to the state in reduced medical costs from people with diabetes, heart disease, and pregnant people and yield an economic return of \$21.6 million annually through an increase in federal funds and an increase in dental spending, with the largest boost coming to rural areas of the state.⁴

These statistics paint part of the picture. The stories of the estimated 150,000 Mainers the bill would benefit fill in the spaces the numbers don't. I have spoken to patients whose dental emergencies could have been prevented with regular check-ups, whose pain and missed time at work were an unnecessary result of a health care system that doesn't recognize that dental care is health care. I have heard from dental care providers who would gladly accept adult MaineCare patients if the program only covered preventive care. You will hear from many of these same people. If the statistics I and others have offered aren't enough to convince you of the benefit of this legislation, please allow the stories from your fellow Mainers to get you to a "yes" vote. Dental care is health care and health care is a basic human right. I urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 996. Thank you.

Kelli Whitlock Burton
Co-Leader, Suit Up Maine

³ Jeffcoat MK, et. al. Impact of periodontal therapy on general health: evidence from insurance data for five systemic conditions. *Am J Prev Med.* 2014 Aug;47(2):166-74. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2014.04.001. Epub 2014 Jun 18. [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(14\)00153-6/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(14)00153-6/fulltext)

⁴ Vujicic M, Fosse C. Estimating the Cost of Introducing a Medicaid Adult Dental Benefit in Maine. Health Policy Institute, American Dental Association. March 2021. https://mainepcoh.org/publications/ADA_HPI_Estimating_the_Cost_of_MADB_in_Maine_FINAL.pdf