

March 1, 2024

Testimony re: LD 227: “An Act Regarding Health Care in the State” – OUGHT TO PASS

Good afternoon Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and honorable members of the Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments in support of LD 227. My name is Chris McLaughlin, and I am humbled to be the Executive Director of the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW ME). On behalf of our over 1000 members here in Maine, I’m honored to share thoughts on this important piece of proposed legislation. I also am a licensed clinical social worker with almost 25 years of experience providing and leading behavioral health services across a variety of treatment settings here in Maine. For all of those years, I have worked directly in some capacity with transgender and gender diverse youth and their parents and families. Across my professional career, I have provided training to schools, community organizations, and healthcare facilities around the unique needs of trans- and gender diverse clients. I am well known and respected across our state and country as being an expert in affirming healthcare practices for the LGBTQ+ community.

NASW Maine is firmly in support of LD 227 and would like to offer our sincere gratitude to Senator Bailey and Representative Perry for their work on this important issue. While LD 227 offers protections for several forms or medically necessary healthcare services, my comments here today will primarily focus on one aspect of LD 227, that of gender-affirming care. For the record, NASW Maine strongly believes that access to gender-affirming care and reproductive healthcare is critical to protect individual physical and mental well-being. We also believe that these types of healthcare decisions are best had between patients and the trained and competent providers overseeing their care. As you might know, gender affirming care encompasses a range of medical treatments and procedures that enable individuals to align their physical appearance with their gender identity. This can include hormone therapy, gender confirmation surgeries, and other forms of medical and psychological care. For many transgender individuals, gender affirming care is essential to their mental and physical well-being and denying them access to these treatments can have devastating consequences. Early intervention is crucial for mental and physical well-being, helping to reduce mental health disparities and improve overall quality of life. Limiting access to gender-affirming care is dangerous. Research has consistently shown that gender-affirming care significantly reduces rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among transgender youth. Leading medical organizations, such as the American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, endorse gender-affirming care as appropriate and necessary treatment for these young individuals.

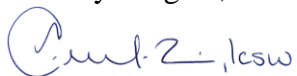
Unfortunately, there are still many barriers to accessing gender affirming care, including discrimination from healthcare providers, limited insurance coverage, and legislative efforts to restrict access to these treatments. We have seen these legislative restrictions emerge across the country. In fact, last year, the ACLU has identified almost 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills that had been introduced across the country. Many of these bills are efforts to restrict gender-affirming care to some of the most vulnerable individuals in our country today: transgender youth. Unfortunately, several of these states have enacted laws restricting or banning access to gender-affirming care for minors. Simply put, Maine is better than this.

To ensure equal access to treatment for all transgender youth, we must eliminate barriers to gender-affirming care, such as financial burdens, insurance coverage, and geographical limitations. These barriers not only harm individuals seeking care, but also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and discrimination against the transgender

community as a whole. Gender-affirming care is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it is implemented through a tailored treatment plan crafted between healthcare experts and their patients and guardians that takes into account each individual's unique needs, goals, and circumstances. NASW ME believes that it is essential whenever possible to involve parents and guardians in the decision-making process, ensuring they are educated and informed about their child's gender-affirming care. When clinically appropriate, implementing an informed consent model allows for a thorough understanding of the potential benefits, risks, and alternatives associated with gender-affirming treatments and strengthens the emotional support system that many transgender youth need to live their best lives possible. Furthermore, increased education and training for healthcare providers, educators, and legislators are necessary to better understand and support the unique needs of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth. Addressing the harmful impact of discrimination and stigma on transgender youth is vital, and gender-affirming care plays a critical role in mitigating these effects. It is imperative that we work to remove these barriers and ensure that all individuals have access to the gender affirming care they need, both those individual here and Maine and in other parts of the country where this care has wrongfully been made illegal. This includes passing legislation that protects transgender individuals, especially youth, from discrimination in healthcare settings and ensuring that insurance coverage for gender affirming care is comprehensive and affordable.

Protecting gender affirming care is not only a matter of individual health and well-being, but also a matter of human rights and equality. It's also a matter of dignity, respect, and safety. New data from The Trevor Project (2023) from a study of more than 28,000 LGBTQ young people (aged 13-24) across the United States found that nearly 2 in 3 LGBTQ young people said that hearing about potential state or local laws banning people from discussing LGBTQ people at school made their mental health a lot worse. By supporting gender-affirming care for youth, we are not only promoting their mental and physical well-being, but also fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society for all who live, work, and play in our great State. By passing LD 227, we are sending a very strong message to our state's transgender and gender-diverse youth that they DO belong here in Maine. It also sends a clear message of support and affirmation to the rest of the country. I urge this committee to take action and join those other states across the nation to have enacted shield laws to protect reproductive and gender-affirming healthcare and ensure that those that need these services have access to the care they need to live full and healthy lives. I want to thank you all for your work on this issue. Please do not hesitate to reach out to NASW ME for any support we can offer, including any social work representation and participation in any future work sessions for LD 227.

Thank you again,



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