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TESTIMONY ON LD 1995 URGING FUNDING TO CLOSE THE MAINECARE  
COVERAGE EXCLUSION BASED ON IMMIGRANT STATUS  
(AS PROVIDED BY LD 718)

Senator Breen, Representative Pierce and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

My name is Jane Makela, and I am a resident of Falmouth, Maine. I offer this testimony as a proud citizen and taxpayer of Maine and also on behalf of the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network, which links Maine's 25 Unitarian Universalist congregations in advocating for just, humane laws that recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every individual.

I can hardly think of a pending bill before this Legislature that more clearly presents the opportunity to promote –or conversely, to disregard, the inherent worth and dignity of a group of Maine's residents than LD 718, which would rectify the exclusion from MaineCare coverage of those otherwise qualified strictly because of their immigrant status.

I understand that the proposed budget, as it currently stands, does not include funding to right this wrong, but I urge the Legislature to find the funds to do so. (I also recognize that MaineCare coverage was restored to children and pregnant women through the Supplemental Budget during the last session, but adults continue to be excluded).

I am a retired lawyer now providing pro bono legal services, mostly to asylum seekers here in Maine. For more than 15 years, I have been closely involved in the lives of those individuals and have watched with respect—and frankly with awe, how they meet challenge after challenge posed by the federal and state government, remaining committed to acquiring the skills and connections to become fully contributing, tax-paying, business-starting members of our communities. Yet we tell them they are not worthy of our State's healthcare safety net.

Because of gross underfunding and understaffing of the federal immigration system, these asylum seekers often wait years to even have a chance to present their asylum claims to a decision-maker. Indeed, one of my clients has now been waiting almost 8 years to have her asylum interview. Assuming her income remained low enough to otherwise qualify for MaineCare throughout that period, that would be 8 years she would have been excluded simply because the immigration system prevents her from attaining the next level of immigrant status (asylee) that would allow her to qualify.

The federal immigration system also requires long waits for the newly arrived to obtain work authorization, but even when they do, many work in low wage jobs where employer health coverage is nonexistent. While they have access to limited Emergency MaineCare, that care is no substitute for necessary post-emergency follow-up, chronic disease management, and other routine care necessary to keep them healthy.

This is particularly ironic since we rely on so many of these New Mainers to fill care provider roles in homes and residential facilities, caring for our most vulnerable loved ones. Is there any category of worker we should care *more* about keeping healthy than those who care for our elders, children, and disabled family members?

This injustice has been entrenched in Maine's laws for too long. Providing MaineCare coverage to *all* who otherwise qualify for it, regardless of immigration status, is the sensible, prudent, and—above all, the moral and humane thing to do. I urge the Legislature to fund such coverage.

Thank you.