



March 31, 2023

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government,

I join you today on behalf of the Maine Women's Lobby. Since 1978, the Maine Women's Lobby has worked to build gender justice in Maine through legislative advocacy and systems change. We are before you today **In Support of LD 794, An Act to Expand the Membership of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women**. Thank you to Senator Vitelli for sponsoring this important bill.

Many of our government structures weren't originally built with women in mind. The imprint of those early decisions still exists today, even when so much has been done to move us forward. Our state government did not imagine at its founding that 44 percent of legislators in Maine would be women.

But despite those measures of progress, **gender is still a key driver in the health, wellness, and economic security of Mainers.**

- Just three weeks ago, Governor Mills and the Dept. of Labor pointed out that **the median income for full time, working women in Maine is still nearly \$10,000 than the average income for men¹ – the gap is far higher for women of color², and it has widened since 2016³.**
- More than 40% of lower-income pregnant people in Maine received no health care in the year prior to their most recent pregnancy⁴ – while the US has **the highest maternal mortality rate in the developed world⁵.**
- Nearly one-quarter of Mainers have experienced rape or attempted rape in their lifetime, **women at more than three times the rate of men (35.7% vs 10.1%).⁶**

These are all systemic challenges, and they need and deserve systemic solutions, embedded in state government.

I can personally recall the days when a women's health coordinator existed at the Maine CDC, when there was a biennial women's health report, and when there was a public-private partnership with multiple organizations meeting monthly to pool resources, knowledge, and information. Other collaborative resources, such as the Women's Employment Commission at

¹ Maine Dept. Of Labor. (2023). Press Release: Governor Mills Proclaims March 14 National Equal Pay Day in Maine.

² US Census Bureau (2021). American Community Survey. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/table?q=median+earnings+by+race&tid=ACSST1Y2021.S2002>

³ U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, 2016-2020.

⁴ National Vital Statistics Report. (2018). Timing and Adequacy of Prenatal Care in the United States, 2016.

⁵ The Commonwealth Fund. (2020). Maternal Mortality in the United States: A Primer. Retrieved from <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-brief-report/2020/dec/maternal-mortality-united-states-primer>

⁶ Dumont and Shaler. (2015). 2015 Maine Crime Victimization Survey: Informing Public Policy for Safer Communities. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/maine_statistical_analysis_center/5/

Maine Department of Labor, have also been closed or folded into other efforts that don't look at systems through a gender lens.

Without those governmental structures, Maine does not have a consistent home or hub for data analysis that accounts for gender. It doesn't have a home to connect the information that comes into the Maine Human Rights Commission – which sees significant numbers of claims based on sex – with what happens at the CDC, which takes in information each year about pregnancy and birthing. **It is far less efficient, and sometimes impossible, to get a clear understanding of where the strengths and gaps are, which makes policy and program development also less effective.**

Though staff in the Secretary of State's Office have worked hard to support the Commission, there has not been dedicated staffing or resources to ensure that the Commission is able to meet its mission of regular reporting on the status of women in Maine. This **makes a real impact on our ability to do informed work to build gender equity – which is not only the right thing to do, but also a commonsense approach to public health, and economic development, and more.**

It's time for the state to invest meaningful resources to ensure that government structures and branches have gender equity as part of a systemic focus, that they are adequately staffed and funded, and that data be collected, analyzed, and presented in accessible ways across departments. An investment in staffing for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women will help us meet that goal.

We hope you will vote Ought to Pass on LD 566.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Destie Hohman Sprague".

Destie Hohman Sprague, Executive Director