



Press Statement

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Call to Action: Rebuild Maine's Public Health System

Under the LePage administration, Mainers have suffered extraordinary losses in public health investments. Public health is like the solid roof over our home, protecting us from rain, wind, and snow, even when we're busy doing other things. Instead of maintaining our roof, Governor LePage and Commissioner Mayhew are taping tarps over the gaps, and the tarps aren't working. As a result, last year, Maine was the only state in the nation to have an increase in its infant mortality rate. Our youth smoking rate is higher than the national average, and in Penobscot and Aroostook counties, the rates are three times the national average. Instead of buckling down, and getting to work, Governor LePage and Commissioner Mayhew are cutting hundreds of good-paying jobs and forfeiting nearly \$2 billion in federal funds intended to help Maine families. In 2011, Maine had 59 public health nurses; today, there are only 20, and at a time when about 1,000 babies are born each year exposed to substances in utero.

Maine is in crisis.

It wasn't always this way. Maine used to be one of the healthiest states in the nation. That should come as no surprise – Mainers are resilient, hardworking people, and we were smart about our investments in low-cost disease prevention, instead of paying for illness after the fact. Unfortunately, times have changed. Now, more Mainers are getting sicker sooner.

For the past several years, Governor LePage and Commissioner Mayhew have purposefully dismantled Maine's public health system, severing the livelihoods of Maine's families. The purposeful deconstruction of public health is a shameful and unethical disservice to Mainers. If Mainers don't stand up today, we'll be facing ripple effects of high costs, low productivity, and more sickness for years to come.

Mainers are resilient and outspoken. We are a state of hard workers who come together to solve problems, and we have what it takes to turn things around. It's time to get back to doing what we do best: working hard, caring for our neighbors, and enjoying Maine's beautiful places.

Specifically, the Maine Public Health Association is calling on policymakers to:

- **Restore Maine’s public health nursing team.** Public health nurses are critical for improving population health and lowering medical costs. Public health nurses serve where health starts – in our homes, schools, communities, and workplaces.
- **Return tobacco settlement funds to the job of preventing tobacco addiction.** Tobacco is Maine’s #1 killer and the tobacco industry spends millions each year targeting kids and young adults as their “replacement smokers.” Preventing tobacco addiction saves lives and reduces the high health costs that come with cancer, and other heart and lung diseases. Reviving prevention efforts and strengthening Maine’s outdated tobacco pricing strategy are powerful deterrents to tobacco addiction in Maine.
- **Provide Maine families the tools they need to eat healthy meals.** Maine currently receives \$4 million in federal USDA SNAP-Ed funds, employing 44 nutrition educators across the state. We need to use these funds as they are intended – to help Mainers with low-incomes shop, cook, and eat healthy on a budget.
- **Pursue and accept federal funding for important prevention and control services.** Why are we rejecting much-needed money that other states are receiving? Maine taxpayers have already paid in, so these federal funds are ours to get back – and cost nothing extra. Federal funds support efficient public-private partnerships, and reduce the burden on Maine taxpayers. It is irresponsible to ignore these opportunities.
- **Tackle the opioid epidemic head-on.** In 2016, 378 Mainers died from a drug overdose. While Maine’s Opioid Health Home model is a step in the right direction, we need more: more local treatment options, more after-school mentoring and internship opportunities, and more recovery tools that help folks get back on their feet.

Research shows that our zip code is a stronger predictor of our health status than our genetic code. We also know that for every \$1 spent on evidence-based, disease prevention programs, we save \$5.60 in health spending and get back \$7.50 in economic output. **Instead of allowing our public health roof to deteriorate, we need to get to work repairing the damage and shoring up the gaps, reinforcing what’s already working, and expanding opportunities for all Mainers to lead healthy lives – regardless of their income or where they live. Investments now mean a healthier and more prosperous Maine for generations to come – and that’s the way life should be.**

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The Maine Public Health Association is a nonprofit organization dedicated to assuring the health of Maine’s people and places.

For more information, please visit: www.mainepublichealth.org.