

Speaker Talbot Ross: 'Health care for all' must not rule out immigrants

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By Rachel Talbot Ross

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All means all. It sounds simple, but when it comes to accessing healthcare in Maine, it isn't.

L.D. 199, my bill to provide MaineCare to all Mainers with qualifying low income, regardless of immigration status, would provide much needed fairness, equity and simplicity to our Medicaid program. And based on the heartfelt testimony I recently heard in support of the bill from parents, workers, health care providers and advocates from across the state, it is abundantly clear that the time for this legislation is now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Talbot Ross, D-Portland, is Speaker of the Maine House.

Immigrants who testified at a long and often emotional public hearing shared their love of living and working in Maine, how much they care about the health and safety of their communities, and how deeply they want to be included and respected as part of our state.

They desire what every generation of immigrants to Maine has – a chance to live in peace and safety, to build a life, and to give their children a strong start in this beautiful place.

Crystal Cron, founding director of Presente! Maine said, “Immigrants have been contributing to the strength and vitality of Maine for centuries. They have resettled here with hopes and dreams of building a new life for themselves, and of investing in the communities they now call home. And they *have* invested. If you’ve worked thousands of hours in a lobster plant, or in the blueberry fields, or in potato packing, aren’t you a Mainer? The health of one is the health of us all, and we *all* reap the benefits when our communities are cared for.”

Others testified to the tragic loss of life and livelihood that immigrants they know have experienced. A loving and involved father of two elementary students in Falmouth died of treatable cancer, orphaning them. Two young members of the Congolese community who could not afford basic health screenings died suddenly last year in Lewiston.

L.D. 199 is a straightforward bill that would help close a small but unjust gap in our MaineCare system and return Maine to its longstanding practice of greater inclusion. It was only in 2011, under the LePage administration, that this access was restricted. This initiative would continue building on Maine’s health care progress that began with Medicaid expansion, and repair a two-tiered health care system that is divided along complex and ever-evolving immigration lines. And it would help prevent untold tragedies through affordable medicine or regular preventative medical care.

Just as we have seen with Medicaid expansion, helping more people afford health care will also have beneficial ripple effects for our workforce and economy.

In 2018, immigrants in Maine contributed at least \$193.9 million in state and local taxes. That number is certainly higher today. Yet they pay into a healthcare system that they are not allowed to access. This is unfair and tragically short-sighted. The overall costs of missed workdays, lower production, and disability far outweigh the direct costs of medical care. As we wait for Congress to make the necessary federal reforms to our broken immigration system, providing healthcare to our essential workers is something we can do now.

Access to affordable healthcare saves lives and reduces costs in overall healthcare spending. Currently, the people who would gain coverage from my bill are only eligible for Emergency MaineCare to stabilize a life-threatening emergency. Patients who lack full health coverage often delay or go without care until a condition worsens and becomes an emergency, resulting in more costly and resource-intensive services that place unnecessary burdens on our hospitals and the entire health care system.

Mainers voted overwhelmingly to expand Medicaid and the Maine Legislature has honored the will of the voters. It is time to finish what we started and make sure all Maine residents have the healthcare they need and deserve.

My fellow lawmakers have a choice to make. Will we put our values into policy and practice and ensure that everyone in our state can access necessary care? Or will we continue to disregard the needs of people who keep our state running? Let's choose equity, prosperity and a health care system that works better – no exceptions, no exclusions – for all.

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