

CAHC's Press Release

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Consumer Reports' Medical Debt Expert visits Maine Urges policy makers to address increasing medical debt in Maine

Chuck Bell, Program Director with Consumer Reports, discussed the issue of medical debt, its causes, and possible solutions with Maine policy makers on Thursday. "Medical debt undermines the ability of individuals and households to have stable incomes, avoid financial stress and poverty, and achieve economic stability," declared Bell. He added, "Medical debt in itself can cause sickness."

Bell cited the results of a [Kaiser Family Foundation 2022 Medical Debt survey](#) showing that 100 million Americans carry medical debt (41% of US Adults). He noted an [analysis](#) of federal data estimating medical debt totaled at least \$195 billion in 2019. Bell suggested policy solutions to address this crisis, including:

- expanding insurance coverage and reducing cost-sharing
- reforming medical billing to reduce and eliminate amount of debt incurred;
- expanding access to financial assistance and low-cost payment plans
 - _ reducing and eliminating harsh medical debt collection practices, such as:
 - _ reducing high interest rates for medical debt
 - _ limiting lawsuits, court judgments, liens and garnishment of wages
 - _ limiting reporting to credit bureaus.

Ann Woloson, Executive Director of Consumers for Affordable Care, shared some Maine-specific data from a [survey conducted of Mainers](#) released last year showing that 42% of Mainers carry medical debt. "Mainers with medical debt report the struggles they have paying for basic necessities like food, heat or housing. Many say they have had to use all or most of their savings to help pay off some of their debt, incurred new or additional credit card debt, or been contacted by a collection agency," said Woloson. "The bulk of medical debt is the result of a hospital bill. Mainers also report experiencing pain or discomfort and delaying or skipping care when they are sick due to medical costs."

Woloson was joined by Senate President Troy Jackson and Senator Mike Tipping who have legislative proposals that would address medical credit card debt and the sale of medical credit card debt.

Woloson noted the survey showed that a majority of Mainers support efforts to address medical debt including:

- strengthening and enforcing hospital price transparency rules;
- putting limits on the prices that hospitals can charge services based on actual costs of providing care and cost-growth caps; and
- increasing the amount of financial assistance non-profit hospitals must provide.

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