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## Making Maine More Attractive to Young People

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# Margaret Chase Smith Library 2020 Essay Contest

*Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2020 asked students to propose how they would make Maine “the way life should be” for young people so that more of them will choose to live in a state with one of the oldest populations in the nation. Essays have been edited for length.*

## FIRST-PLACE ESSAY

### Making Maine More Attractive to Young People

by Everett Beals

For visitors to the state of Maine, our spirit of hospitality is one of the first things they notice. It marks our license plates, our highway signage, and is written on the face of almost every local. Slogans famously describe Maine in terms like “Vacationland” and “The Way Life Should Be,” but there’s one that stands out to me. On drives over the Piscataqua River Bridge in Kittery, the sign that reads “Maine: Worth a Visit, Worth a Lifetime” never fails to catch my eye. While all communicate a message of hospitality, this one in particular speaks to something deeper. This kind of branding is indicative of preliminary efforts to address the largest problem our state has yet faced in the twenty-first century: many young Mainers end up leaving as adults, and few young nonresidents are choosing to move here. There is no one solution to this complex challenge, which itself is largely symptomatic of and uniquely interconnected with three central issues—an evolving job market, an aging population, and a massive labor shortage; however, the solutions are not unknown. Some solutions can already be found in our communities, and many are within our reach. In tackling these issues,

we may create a Maine of opportunity for our youth.

To understand how our present labor and population dynamics came to be, we must first understand our past. By the twentieth century, Maine’s once small villages had grown to be powered by industrial jobs, often in mill complexes statewide. These jobs were followed by service businesses, often to support the expanding working population facilitated by manufacturers. This was the foundation on which our communities were built; it led to new schools, affordable housing, and had connected all corners of what Maine Historical Society records described as once a “state of islands.” Those accounts detail the downfall of the *ocean highway*, when the first real challenges for Maine’s newly industrialized communities arose (MHS n.d.). Textile facilities statewide faced extreme pressure from now global competitors. Unable to sustain the delicate business situation, many were bought out, consolidated elsewhere, or shut down entirely. Seemingly all at once, thousands were out of work statewide, and communities started shrinking as fast as they once grew.

In towns across the state formerly reliant on manufacturing work, ghostly towers of shuttered mills cast a shadow on an unsure populace. After that first period of decline, all that remained inland were the pulp and paper mills, the backbone of Maine’s industrial economy. A second wave of manufacturing shutdowns started to batter the state in the early 2000s, later compounded by the 2008 recession. The story of communities devastated in the twentieth century such as Sanford, Lewiston, and Skowhegan is now being relived in towns such as Millinocket, Rumford, and Lincoln. An article by Crandall et al. (2017) attempted to measure the full impact of the closures. Noting that only nine paper or pulp plants remain open, they observed that communities that had lost those manufacturers are struggling to rebuild. Even mills only reduced to lower capacities could not serve the high-skill workforce developed around them; jobs were cut substantially. Research indicated that every major paper-manufacturing center along the Penobscot River had been closed by the year 2016. In Millinocket, as a 2018 *Wall Street Journal* piece by John Kamp details, population has shrunk by 16 percent since 2000, with residents scrambling to find ways to facilitate business while encouraging the young to stay.

It is important to remember the story of Maine’s industrial decline to understand in part why so many young people leave the state. The traditional job market has changed, and good jobs are no longer available statewide, especially in towns bordering the Maine wilderness. The lack of good jobs has created a stigma that pervades even those communities that have found new revenue sources, especially along the coast. It is something

the organization Live + Work in Maine calls an awareness issue, affecting both our state psyche and national image. Many residents leave because of lack of opportunity, and many would-be immigrants perceive the same to be true for the whole state. It's not productive to lament what once was; rather we must understand the lesson taught. We cannot expect industry to come back. As we approach these issues, we should see these towns as part of the answer as they create opportunities to stem the flight of their young residents.

Our next greatest challenge involves the population worst affected by the economic downturn. If there's any reason we're going to need more young people in our state, it's because of our elderly. Maine is now the oldest state in the nation, with an average age of 44.9 (Valigra 2019). By 2026, we will witness a 55 percent increase in individuals over age 65. Total population change from year to year is nearly stagnant, at a mere 0.25 percent increase from 2017 to 2018. In fact, Maine deaths outnumber births. Perhaps more immediately concerning than low population growth, or even an aging society, is that most healthcare professionals attending to the elderly are themselves old. Around a third of our physicians are over 60, and half of the registered nurses in rural counties are over 55 (Stein 2019). What's more, the critical load soon expected to test our healthcare infrastructure may already have arrived in those same regions. One nursing home group in northern Maine has had to close admissions to 26 of its facilities due to low staffing. This problem reflects the final challenge our state faces in relation to the outmigration of young people: a labor shortage of seemingly unprecedented scale.

The shifts in the dynamics of our workforce first came as a surprise to Mainers. Though certain communities

were left behind in economic terms, it seemed that Maine had recovered from its employment woes. In June 2019, Maine enjoyed an unemployment rate of 2.9 percent, well below the national average of 3.8 percent.<sup>1</sup> The signs of a major workforce shortage began to creep in, first presenting themselves more acutely in coastal communities. I have seen it happen in my hometown of Kennebunk, as businesses become increasingly desperate for help. Downeast, the situation is largely the same, if not worse, as suggested by reporting from Kate Cough (2018) in the *Ellsworth American*. In the article, a business owner from Hancock says, "I don't think there *is* a labor market. There just is no workforce anymore." What he describes is only the tip of the iceberg. Elsewhere, workforce shortages started showing up in the medical fields and in skilled services. MaineSpark, an advocacy group for adult education, estimates that the state will need 158,000 more skilled workers by 2025.<sup>2</sup> Though experts have had trouble pinpointing exact causes, in a roundtable interview with Maine Public Broadcasting, state government economists and local business leaders pointed to two familiar issues: our older workers are retiring and we are losing our young people.<sup>3</sup>

How we address these issues will determine how we get young people to stay and get our state working for everyone. Understanding this, I have five proposals:

First, and most importantly, we need to emphasize that we as a *whole* state have to solve the problem together. All too often, it seems that answers to the problem come only from southern, coastal Maine and do not include those frontier communities shaken by the second industrial withdrawal as part of the solution. This needs to change because we should be looking to them for creative answers.

Second, to keep young Mainers around and to solve our labor crisis, we must improve our educational system. It starts with increased funding for mentorship and vocational programs in our schools, which are pathways to good, local jobs. Unfortunately, not every high school is able to provide the opportunities to learn those skills. We must empower the Department of Education to expand its existing career and technical education schools—of which there are only 19, scattered across the state—while also advocating for these programs to be taught in more high schools. Of the state's \$1.1 billion contribution to education in school year 2018–2019, only \$50 million has been allocated for such investment.<sup>4</sup> We should see the labor shortage as an opportunity for young Mainers, though they must be properly equipped. To ensure they are, the state must increase the affordability and availability of our community colleges and state universities. Included in this investment should also be further advancements in loan forgiveness programs and childcare. Similar actions are already producing results; Northeastern University announced in January 2020 that it will be constructing a graduate research campus in Portland with the support of Maine businesses (Thomsen 2020).

Third, like much of rural America, workers in Maine often suffer because of the distance between home and employment. Our state's transportation infrastructure, from roads and bridges to buses and trains, is crumbling, if not absent. In fact, in an editorial in the *Bangor Daily News* ("Yet Another Reason to Invest in Maine's Transportation Infrastructure," July 22, 2019), the editorial board stated that Maine's infrastructure systems are ranked fourth worst in the nation. Existing transportation systems hardly reach out of major metro areas. Those regions are now the economic centers of

our state; without proper infrastructure to support even the existing population, how can we expect growth?

Fourth, we must continue to lead in the fields of tomorrow. Renewable energy production will increasingly become a necessity, and Maine's leadership in the region has provided a variety of good jobs. The US Energy Information Administration reported in 2018 that three-fourths of our electricity comes from renewable resources and that Maine leads New England in wind turbine investment (US EIA 2020). Other industries, like aquaculture, have grown rapidly as a complement to traditional fishing professions. Yearly harvest value approached \$90 million in 2019 (Maine DMR n.d.), and local aquaculture has revived many coastal towns. Further inland, innovative recreation businesses have put former mill towns back on the map. Jobs like these provide opportunity for both locals and outside investors, with high-tech jobs encouraging young Mainers to stay.<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, affordable housing remains a serious obstacle for young people in Maine seeking high-paying jobs, especially in the Portland metro area. In 2019, only half of Portland's residents can afford rent, with a massive inequality existing between housing prices and earned wages (McGuire 2019). New housing is often intended for people with either very low incomes or very high incomes and rarely caters to middle-income workers. Through systematic reforms, we can encourage in-migration to our major cities and support those living there now including refugee communities.

These are only the first steps, but our guiding focus throughout must be making Maine a state with more accessible opportunities for everyone. We already have a state where life is the way it should be. We just need to make sure young people can take advantage of it, no

matter where they live. The country will look to us for answers, as countless more states experience what we have. Remembering the saying, "as Maine goes, so goes the nation," let's make where we're going be to a brighter future for our youth. 🐦

## NOTES

- 1 Unemployment rates are from the Maine Center for Workforce Research and Information (<https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/laus.html>) and US Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t01.htm>) websites.
- 2 <https://mainespark.me/>
- 3 "Workforce Shortage: Why Are Maine Businesses in Need of More Workers, and What Can Be Done?" *Maine Calling*, Maine Public Broadcasting Network, July 16, 2019.
- 4 Reports on education spending are available on the Maine Department of Education's website: <https://www.maine.gov/doe/funding/gpa/eps/18-19>.
- 5 Data in this paragraph come from the following sources: "Maine: State Profile and Energy Estimates," US Energy Information Administration, July 16, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/state/index.php?sid=ME>; "Total Maine Aquaculture Harvest Data," Maine Department of Marine Resources, accessed 31 March, 2020. <https://www.maine.gov/dmr/aquaculture/harvestdata/index.html>.

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**Everett Beals** graduated from Kennebunk High School, where he enjoyed his time as a member of the Congressional Debate Team, his work with the

Theater Department, and his tenure on the school newspaper, *The Herd*. This fall, he will be attending Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, to study environmental science.