

Opening Statement of Senator Susan Collins
“The TICK Act: An Urgent Public Health Response to Tick-Borne Diseases
Sept. 5, 2019

Good morning. Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases have soared in Maine and across the country during the past 15 years. Many of you here today have had first-hand experiences with the devastating consequences of tick-borne diseases. I would like to take a moment to recognize Susie Whittington, whose mother Lyn Snow, a well-known artist who captured Maine so beautifully, tragically died in 2013 from the deadliest tick-borne disease known as Powassan. Thank you so much Susie for being here with us today.

My thanks also to the University of Maine Cooperative Extension’s Tick Lab for hosting this hearing. I just toured the lab and I was so impressed with the extraordinary research and work that is going on here. I saw firsthand how its outstanding work is advancing our understanding of the diseases that ticks carry and how the employees of the lab are working every day to protect Mainers. They also do a host of other important work in this lab and it was wonderful to learn more about it so thank you, Jim Dill for arranging for the tour and for all you did to welcome us.

In Maine last year, there were approximately 1,400 new cases of Lyme disease, nearly double the number of cases in 2010, as we can see on the chart. Listen to this fact: the incidence of Lyme disease in Maine is the highest in the country – at 107 cases per 100,000 Mainers, which is 10 times higher than the national average. I was talking with President Joan Ferrini-Mundy here today and talking about the work that the lab is doing and the University is doing

and how incredibly important it is. It includes this tick removal kit which the lab will make available to anyone who wants one and which our wardens and other state employees who are working outside, like the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife can use.

Other tick-borne diseases are also on the rise. For example, Anaplasmosis, related to ricketts, has increased by more than five-fold. While ticks do not discriminate, and the diseases they carry affect Americans of all ages, tick-borne diseases disproportionately affect people over the age of 65. That's why as the Chairman of the Aging Committee, I thought it would be appropriate for us to hold this hearing.

From children to seniors, far too many Americans with Lyme disease experience a complex diagnostic odyssey that takes months or even years. One of my nieces, Catherine Collins, contracted Lyme disease and had a very difficult time getting an accurate diagnosis. She went on to get Lyme disease two additional times but at least in those cases she knew what to look for. Regrettably, her story is not at all unusual as we will learn from our witnesses.

In addition to the physical and emotional toll that Lyme disease can impose, it is also expensive. Medical costs of Lyme disease are estimated at \$1.3 billion per year. When accounting for indirect medical costs, including the loss of work, the annual costs balloon to \$75 billion per year.

A correct and early diagnosis can reduce costs and improve the prognosis. But we have a long way to go. When HIV became a public health crisis, a gold standard for identification and

treatment was developed within 10 years. Lyme disease was identified more than 40 years ago, yet there is still no gold standard for treatment. Existing prevention, education, and diagnostic efforts are helpful but remain fragmented. It is time for us to unite against ticks.

Earlier this year, I introduced a bipartisan bill with Minnesota Senator Tina Smith and my Maine colleague, Senator Angus King. It's called the TICK Act. *TICK* in the name of our bill stands for Ticks: Identify, Control, and Knockout. Through a uniform and unified approach, this legislation would arm local communities and states with the resources they need for prevention, early detection, and treatment of tick-borne diseases.

The TICK Act would apply a three-pronged approach to tackle Lyme and other tick and vector-borne diseases. First, it would establish an office to develop a national strategy to prevent tick-borne diseases. Second, the bill would reauthorize Centers for Disease Control Regional Centers of Excellence in Vector-Borne Diseases that have led the scientific response to fighting ticks. Finally, the bill would establish grants to support state health departments' efforts to improve data collection and analysis, early detection and diagnosis, treatment, and public awareness, and that indeed is one of the purposes of our hearing today.

We are very fortunate to have with us a truly extraordinary group of witnesses including national, state, and local experts. I also am very pleased that we have two individuals who are going to share with us their personal experiences with Lyme disease. These individuals will give us their insights on what it has been like to have Lyme disease and share their journey and their advocacy efforts with us. They are Paula Jackson Jones and Christopher Philbrook.

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