

# Health and Human Services Committee

## Regarding LD 779; An Act to Create a Separate Department of Child and Family Services

### Testifying in favor of:

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and the honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Melanie Blair. I am a foster parent and educator from Lisbon. I am asking you to vote ought to pass on LD 779.

As a foster parent in my ninth year, it has become noticeably clear to me, and many foster parents I am in communication with, that OCFS as it stands under DHHS, is way too large to manage effectively with far too many shortcomings and deficiencies that are not being acknowledged or addressed in a timely manner. Consequently, the children on department radar, or in the custody of DHHS, are being subjected to unacceptable rates of repeat abuse and neglect as well as lingering in custody for far longer than the federal statutory requirements that state; *within twelve months, "children and youth in state custody...should transition to safe, lifelong families."* [www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/data-reports-initiatives/child-welfare](http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/data-reports-initiatives/child-welfare) . The National Standard is 40.5% or higher. Maines average in the last monthly update was 23%, with only 16% in the district that I foster in. Which is also the district that has the highest staff vacancy rate. This is not a new problem, rather, it has significantly gotten worse over the last 4 years. OCFS as it currently stands under DHHS, is failing to keep Maines Children safe, failing to give children a timely, permanent family in a safe home, failing to do their job in a respectful manner to all parties involved. The statements made over the last two years that 'we are making improvements' have not come to

fruition despite the money and resources that have been thrown at these issues. A drastic change is needed that will re-structure and change the culture of intimidation, dishonesty, and disregard for those of us in the trenches doing the day-to-day work with these children. Foster parents, caseworkers and others have shared with me that they see and experience these problems often but are intimidated to be quiet and certainly not listened to in a meaningful way. True improvements that will positively affect the safety and wellbeing of children can only be accomplished when you have a culture of open and honest communication, cooperation, and a willingness to see and admit you have a problem. As it stands, we are not able to see behind the iron curtain and this must change.

In a practical life example, I coach 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade boys basketball. If my team continues to fail in the same ways, I am failing them as a coach and I need to make a change. Also, I only need five boys on my team to play in a game, but if I only have five boys, they will burn out and not be effective. But if I have 50 boys on my team, we will all fail or quit because it is not a realistic expectation to manage that many players on one team. Continuing to maintain OCFS under DHHS is much like this example, they will continue to fail if you, the coach- so to speak, do not make a change to their structure.

Therefore, I urge you to vote Ought to Pass. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.