



**Northern Light
Health**

LD 118 An Act To Address Maine's Shortage of Behavioral Health Services for Minors

Testimony in Support

February 11, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Lisa Harvey-McPherson RN and I am here today providing testimony on behalf of Northern Light Health and our member organizations providing comment in support of this bill. Northern Light Health member organizations include 10 hospitals located in southern, central, eastern and northern Maine, 8 nursing facilities, air and ground ambulance, behavioral health, addiction treatment, pharmacy, primary and specialty care practices and a state-wide home care and hospice program. Ninety three percent of Maine's population lives in the Northern Light Health service area. Northern Light Health is also proud to be one of Maine's largest employers with over 12,000 employees statewide.

Nearly every day a Northern Light Health hospital has a young patient in need of behavioral health services in the emergency department for extended periods of time. What used to be an occasional occurrence is now an all too frequent event that highlights how our behavioral health system is failing to meet the needs this vulnerable population.

The scenarios have a common theme; an event that is violent in nature occurs resulting in transport to a local emergency department. Sometimes the youth is brought in by ambulance after a family or foster parent dials 911 other times the Department of Health & Human Services directs that a youth be sent to the emergency department for evaluation and placement. The child is evaluated and often stabilized with support of telepsychiatry from Acadia Hospital. Then our doctors, nurses, social workers, and care managers begin a day by day journey where we fail to meet the discharge needs of these children on a daily basis.

Despite the good intentions of compassion healthcare providers, emergency departments are not the place to provide behavioral healthcare. Emergency departments can be loud, scary, and sterile environments. Children are placed in a designated area and, due to COVID-19, they cannot leave this area. They receive only the bare necessity of services such as medications and a daily evaluation if needed from the psychiatric team, often via telehealth. This is not a comprehensive behavioral health treatment plan. They are stuck, without access to appropriate services, no inpatient pediatric behavioral health beds available, no community based residential facility will accept them, their foster or parents won't accept them back home and they wait, and wait, and wait for a placement opportunity that may take weeks or months to come .

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Northern Light Health

Acadia Hospital
A.R. Gould Hospital
Beacon Health
Blue Hill Hospital
C.A. Dean Hospital
Eastern Maine Medical Center
Home Care & Hospice
Inland Hospital
Maine Coast Hospital
Mercy Hospital
Northern Light Health Foundation
Sebasticook Valley Hospital

School work in the emergency department takes days to get established if they have the necessary supports from their home school district, if not we try to find the best educational resource and the home school often disagrees.

When services become available these children are sent all over the state and the country. Children in the County are sent down state, children in a Portland based emergency department have been sent to Fort Kent for services. Some are transferred to Acadia or Spring Harbor hospitals. The highest volume of need is the most difficult to find, residential treatment placements. Youth are often sent out of state for the residential treatment they need.

This happens to children young and old. A quick query out to Northern Light Health member organizations identified an age range of children 9 to 17 in, or having been in, our emergency departments and with a length of stay ranging from 5 to 77 days waiting to access the behavioral health care they need. It is also common for these children to have multiple emergency department admissions over time.

On any given day there are 12-14 children in emergency departments waiting for a bed to become available at Acadia Hospital. Children at Acadia Hospital are also impacted by the lack of residential treatment beds in the community as lack of access results in long lengths of stay in the hospital that exacerbates the challenge experienced by children in the emergency department needing inpatient care.

Addressing and resolving the issue of children stuck in emergency departments awaiting behavioral health care requires us to uniformly proclaim that this is not acceptable and from the highest level of government a commitment must be made that this will be resolved. We are in full support of Representative McCreight's amendment to direct the Children's Cabinet of the State of Maine to develop a plan to address the problem of children who get stuck in hospital emergency departments for period that exceed 24 hours as they await access to appropriate behavioral health treatment facilities. It will take everyone at the table fully engaged in achieving solutions to serve these children in need.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in support of this important bill.