



February 24, 2023

Senators Rotundo & Baldacci, Representatives Sachs & Meyers and esteemed members of the committees. My name is Kristin Ricciardone, and I am a Vice President of Programs at The Opportunity Alliance and am here today representing the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative in support of the Governor's proposed budget, LD 258.

Let me start by expressing my thanks to you, the entire legislature, and the Mills administration for the support and the financial investment that the behavioral health sector has received. We truly appreciate your efforts, and we know that there is still work to be done to address the needs of individuals living with mental illness and substance use disorders.

As leaders of important community-based organizations, we are often before you speaking about specific details regarding rates and other aspects that make our agencies viable in order that we are able to serve the people who need our help. Today I want to focus my remarks on the grave concerns we have about the behavioral health system in Maine.

The workforce crisis – we continue to experience a significant workforce shortage in Maine that has now risen to crisis levels. At The Opportunity Alliance today, we have 80+ staff vacancies across the organization and have had to close programs and are facing more program closures. We need to work together, including all voices, to address this challenge. We do not see a light at the end of the tunnel and the problem is seriously impacting service access and delivery.

Access to services – Largely due to the workforce challenges, individuals and families cannot access the services that they need in their communities. As a licensed clinical social worker with 20+ years of experience, I continuously get calls from clients, family members, and colleagues who are desperately looking for services for an individual, family, or a loved one. Five years ago, we could have secured services within 24 hours. The best we can do today is add people to waitlists. This is just not okay. When someone is “bleeding”, we cannot place them on a waitlist.

We need regulatory relief – At The Opportunity Alliance, we undergo some type of audit nine months of the year. These audits take hours of staff time and often seem to be redundant. As community-based organizations, we know that to address the human challenges presented daily, we need a comprehensive system of behavioral health services with maximum flexibility. Sometimes, when we try to design systems, it is through such rigid parameters that eventually we are unable to address the original problems nor root causes.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, we need stakeholder engagement and involvement. We need to hear from clients, family members, municipalities, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and more. If the system is not working effectively for the people that it is intended to help; or services are not available due to a workforce crisis, we need to move into action before it is beyond repair. Receiving difficult feedback is tough, but it does not mean that we should not be engaging as many people as possible in the problem-solving. I am not only here today as behavioral health professional and leader, but one of your constituents as well. I am one of your constituents who has serious concerns about the behavioral health system, opioid

overdoses and deaths, lack of proper access to services, the lack of nurses, social workers, prescribers, and other professionals, and the future of our great state.

We are smart people in Maine with creative minds and a tremendous work ethic. Together, we can address and overcome the challenges that I have shared with you today. Although the information that I have shared seems overwhelming, I am hopeful. We are rugged, caring Mainers and if we put our heads together, we can change the course that we are on. I fully believe that together we can stabilize and enhance the behavioral healthcare system. I know we all want the same thing, which is easy access to quality services that put and keep people on the road to recovery.

In closing, we ask that you support the proposed budget and the investment in behavioral health services. To address the challenges outlined above, we need adequate funding. We are grateful for all that you do and your support and commitment to individuals living with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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On behalf of the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative