

**Informational Testimony from the University of Southern Maine Catherine Cutler Institute,
Presented by Shannon Saxby, M.S.W, Policy Associate, Regarding LD 1712: *An Act Regarding
Driver's Licenses for Individuals in Foster Care*
May 2, 2023**

Good Afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyers and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Shannon Saxby, and I am a Policy Associate at the Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine. I lead the Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT), a contracted project and my content expertise focuses on the needs of young people within the child welfare system. YLAT is a youth and adult partnership committed to improving the short-term experience and long-term outcomes for youth ages 14 and older who are in, or who have been, in foster care. We partner closely with the Office of Child Family Services (OCFS), and alumni of foster care to coordinate monthly YLAT meetings across the state and other leadership events throughout the school year. All meetings and activities incorporate a trauma-informed lens and healing centered approach aimed to support youths' own healing while learning the life-skills needed for their future.

Although there is an abundance of challenges that young people in care experience, the topic that youth continue to raise is the need for more resources to obtain their license and a safe, reliable vehicle. In response, in 2018, I co-created and began facilitating a Driving Workgroup in partnership with OCFS. Over time, this group has been comprised of current and former young people experiencing the foster care system, Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine (AFFM), AAA, the OCFS, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles and the Deputy Secretary of State.

I am here today to provide an overview of a pilot program developed by Maine's Driving Workgroup, the structure of which can inform your consideration of LD 1712, which would support several of its key recommendations which includes:

- **Establishing** a program for youth in out-of-home placement to obtain assistance in support toward obtaining a license, enrolling in driver's education, acquiring driving hours and learning how to obtain driver's insurance.
- **Providing** financial support for youth in out-of-home placements in their driving pursuits.
- **Recruiting** current and former youth in out-of-home placements to take part in an annual survey regarding their driving needs.

For context, Maine's Driving Workgroup did extensive research on best practices nationwide to complement the Department of Health and Human Service's current driving policy for youth who are within the custody of OCFS. Currently, OCFS supports driving for youth in care through its Youth Transition Policy (V.T. Youth Transition Policy, n.d.). This policy specifically ensures the cost of driver's education and the cost of driving hours with a private driving instructor, if necessary, is paid by OCFS. Ultimately, we modeled our pilot after North Carolina's T.R.I.P. program, which brought young people, their caregivers and the Department to the table to develop a youth/caregiver agreement. This program also enabled caregivers to request reimbursement for costs they incurred while supporting the young person in their home such as an increase in insurance, supporting registration and/or car repairs.

In 2020, federal legislation allowed Chaffee funding to be temporarily increased to allow OCFS to help youth in care obtain their driver's license. The YLAT team was quickly able to support the OCFS getting this financial support into the hands of young people through a temporary program known as the Voluntary Extended Support Pandemic Program Agreement (VESPPA). Youth aged 21-26 were able to use the funding for obtaining a driver's license (driver's education classes and testing fees, private lessons, practice hours, license fees), Vehicle Insurance, Roadside Assistance, deductibles and auto repairs, and assistance in purchasing an automobile. The total driving-related costs did not exceed \$3,000 during the entire VESPPA period. A total of \$733,000 was disbursed to young people during the VESPPA program; approximately 13% or \$95,250 were used directly for car related expenses. Car-related needs were the highest identified need/expense during this period which concluded in September 2021.

Federal legislation also provided one-time funding for states to receive technical assistance (TA) for driving. Maine was one of 10 states to receive this TA through Embrace Families. Throughout the summer of 2022, three sessions were held to gather information driving within Maine by our TA coaches including:

- Current laws and regulations around driver's licenses
- Current policies that exist to support youth
- Youth and adult perspective on barriers and needs

At the conclusion of the TA, Maine received tailored recommendations that could be implemented to best support youth.

Based on the recommendations that came out of the TA, a soft pilot was launched in October 2022 through a small amount of funding provided by a national funder. There was a total amount of \$11,900 to utilize and each youth who applied could receive up to \$1,500.

The pilot illustrated the importance of financial literacy training to support the young person being able to afford costs associated with car ownership and licensure. Young people who received funds through Maine's Driving Pilot were encouraged to enroll in the first available Opportunity Passport™ training to gain financial literacy skills and develop a plan with the OCFS and their resource parent(s) to supplement their driving costs once the pilot program concluded.

The pilot served nine young people within a 30-day period. 33% of those served are young people who receive the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) voucher through Portland Housing Authority, which was an intentional equity strategy because they do not receive other state funds. 55% of those who received funding put the funding towards a down payment of a vehicle.

Ultimately, LD 1712 would be an opportunity to build upon strong partnerships, research, and data that has been in process for the last five years. It would provide an opportunity to scale the pilot programs that have already been beneficial to youth in care across Maine. Please let me know if I can provide additional information in advance of your work session.

Thank you for your time and consideration today.