

Stefanie Millette, Freeport Maine

Current roles:

Grants Manager of Davis Family Foundation, portfolio includes 1M+ annual private giving to social service areas that impact Maine's most vulnerable families

Foster Parent (long term, short term, respite, and emergency placements), 5+ years

Past roles:

Founding Board Chair of Camp To Belong Maine, a 501c3 that reunites siblings separated by foster care

Former Guardian ad Litem (2+ years)

HR & Benefits management for Cianbro Corporation (2+ years)

Testimony re: L.D. 2078

As a foster parent, former guardian ad litem, and former leader of a 501c3 serving youth in Maine's foster care system, I support this bill with reservations that it will place burdens on overstretched positions, or fail to be equitably applied across all youth. I believe this bill will only be successful if it includes supportive and fully funded infrastructure.

I have summarized reservations on behalf of youth in care, as well as suggestions to address those reservations. I conclude with recent experiences navigating existing benefits as examples of what policy makers could consider before creating policies that could add to ongoing inequities in the system.

Reservation 1 re LD 2078: There is a lack of resources creating benefit inequities. Adding federal benefit requirements to case management could increase those inequities.

Regardless of what state laws or DHHS policies may profess to legislature, current state and federal benefits are inconsistently and inequitably provided to our youth due to caseworker undertraining and variance in foster parent level of involvement. Across the 20+ children I have welcomed a foster parent of in 4+ years, and 200+ Maine foster children I have worked with through Camp To Belong Maine, I see firsthand that typically only children with proactive foster parents who research state benefits, apply for them, and educate their child's family team about them, actually receive the benefits they qualify for. There appears to be no role confirming researching state benefit options and confirming that all caregivers are aware of those. The inequity of information is even more prevalent amongst kinship caregivers who comprise nearly half of foster homes in Maine and as a segment are at higher levels of poverty than non-kinship. *If Federal benefits are handled with the same inconsistency as current benefits and services to our youth, this will further the inequity of experiences for children.*

Reservation 2 re LD 2078: There are specialized qualifications that will make enacting this bill successful.

Even if our state was to eventually fully staff OCFS, the average caseworker's higher education was in social work and/or child development, with no legal or technical writing requirements. Benefits at the Federal level are not static, are impacted by national policy change, and are communicated via documents written for a policymaker audience. It is impractical to expect the department to follow national policy discussions that impact benefits for youth in care.

Proposed Solutions to address reservations from page 1:

1. Add the establishment of full-time paid positions that will oversee the policy education and benefit distribution responsibilities of “Representative Payee”, contained in this bill.

1a. Roles that administer the benefit program for our youth. I cannot imagine (based on real world experience detailed below) that this workload could be reasonably performed by fewer than one administrator per OCFS district. Ideally this role could handle all benefit administration, alleviating the workload of caseworkers and foster parents.

1b. Roles that are federal benefit policy analysts in charge of following and participating in, national conversations that will impact the benefits of youth in state custody

2. Invest in automating claim processing and compensation, to rectify the mistakes currently being made by the state, and to ensure the same mistakes do not further the inequities for youth eligible for federal benefits.

The manual processes for current benefit claim application and payments perpetuates inequities for children. Only the loudest advocates currently get accurately reimbursed by the state.

My home as a case study

These are examples current and simultaneous ongoing issues that have resulted from Maine’s current benefit policies (with the best of intention) that have lacked specific instructions, positions, funding, and accountability measures.

- My infant is eligible for WIC benefits, and MaineCare benefits. At 6 months, WIC decreases the benefit of infant formula for any Maine infant from 12 to 7 cans, despite the facts a.) babies eat *more* as they grow and b.) WHO and pediatricians recommend that formula be the main nutrition source through 1 year. What I’ve learned is that if a caregiver insists that their infant’s nutritional be met, WIC winks (in my case, they literally winked), and you get told about a multi-step unpublished process that starts with a MaineCare waiver and WIC nutritionist. It took me a month to navigate this. I was successful because I’m educated, speak English, have a work schedule that allows for persistent follow-up during traditional business hours. *This broken benefit process contributes to nutrition inequities across class and race in Maine.*
- My infant’s name is listed differently in different benefit systems. She has 2 Maine Care numbers. I make do with a cheat sheet of how every vendor and provider knows her. In respite fostering weekends of 3 other separate children over the last 4 years, they have come with prescriptions made out to different variations of the name I had been provided for that child by DHHS. *This broken benefit administration leaves children at risk of identity theft.*
- DHHS offers a mileage reimbursement benefit for qualified mileage to foster parents. I’ve had a placement for almost 8 months, have submitted mileage forms on time and as trained, and have yet to receive a dollar for the transportation I provide (at the cost of not only mileage, but time

off from my job) to reunite my foster daughter with her parents. I have sent multiple copies via mail, email, even hand to hand delivery. In a Cornell and Spurwink foster focus group in October 2023, two other veteran peer foster stated they had given up on ever seeing a mileage check, and asked the event facilitators if reimbursement claims are “a recruiting trick”. *This broken benefit process discourages new and renewing foster parents.*

- DHHS offers childcare payment benefit for young children in custody. Twice within 5 months I have received a call from my infant’s daycare provider, because if someone in billing at OCFS takes a day off or loses an email, it interrupts childcare benefits from OCFS. In a town with a waitlist of infants wanting my daughter’s spot, I can’t afford to lose my job due to this. I handle the troubleshooting and would pay out of pocket to cover gaps. *This broken benefit process discourages new and renewing foster parents, and makes daycare providers less likely to accept children paid for with the subsidy.*
- Youth in Maine already have some wonderful benefits and rights that they don’t know about
 - o When I was Board Chair of Camp To Belong Maine in the 2013-2015 years, DHHS had budgeted for a camp/extracurricular allotment per child. Youth and foster families were not advised of this. As a current foster parent, I can’t get a straight answer out of the state for teenagers that I support through respite care. If caseworkers have no knowledge of if this benefit exists, how will our kids become aware?
 - o No youth I have worked with in my home has ever heard of the foster bill of rights (over 4+ years). Only 2 out of the 20+ kids have been aware of the right to see their sibling(s).
 - o I provide respite care to teens. I have yet to meet one who understood if Maine provides support around college for teens in care. The state relies on independent programs to spread the word, which is not a fairly accessible communication approach across languages, geography, and living situations.

This failure to educate youth of their rights and benefits leads to loss of sibling connections, missed professional development and extracurricular opportunities, and confusion around higher education. Youth in foster care being over 20% likely to graduate high school than their peers. This bill is an opportunity to put a funded mandate in place requiring the state to inform youth about ALL the benefits and rights they might be eligible for, specify exactly whom will give rights and benefits trainings, and specify how the state will require DHHS to verify compliance across all youth in custody.