

Testimony of Stephanie Eglinton

Executive Director, Maine Children's Alliance

Neither for nor against, LD 2214, An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

February 26, 2024

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. My name is Stephanie Eglinton and I am the executive director of the Maine Children's Alliance. We are a statewide, non-partisan advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies to improve the lives of all Maine children, youth, and families.

Children live in families. We know that the best way we can support child health and well-being is by ensuring their parents and caregivers have the resources and supports and services that are critical to providing safe, nurturing environments, where children have their basic needs met and they experience safety and stability. This means, for example, having child care so they can work, adequate food and housing, and affordable health care. Recognizing that families having these resources and supports provides for their safety and stability, these are good and needed investments in our current workforce and in the next generation of Mainers.

With this in mind, MCA supports certain provisions in the supplemental budget proposal that represent critical supports for the healthy, safety, and well-being of Maine children and their families. These include:

- Increases for SNAP to meet demand and additional staffing to support increased participation
- Increases for General Assistance to meet increased demand
- Establishment of an injury and violence prevention program
- Covering costs of mental health assessments for increased Yellow Flag Law utilization
- Support to victims of crimes, particularly as it relates to survivors of domestic abuse and violence
- Increased training, support, and pay for child protective workforce through
 - Reorganization of OCFS staff in central and district offices
 - Creation of new positions in each district office for training and support of new caseworkers
 - Addition of legal aides to district offices to reduce caseworker workload

Despite these positive investments, there are also provisions of the budget proposal that represent concerning cuts and restrictions to critical supports for the health and well-being of Maine children and families. The Legislature has made positive strides toward improving

essential supports; now is not the time to pull back on those commitments to Maine children and their families. These include:

- Reduced investments in child care, due to:
 - Delays in implementation of the changes to income eligibility for child care subsidies
 - Delays in implementation of including child care staff in the Maine Child Care Affordability Program and making it a pilot program
 - Failure to carry forward \$4.4 million in funding for monthly child care stipends
- Restrictions to SNAP for some Mainers, due to the proposed repeal of the hardship exemption
- Restrictions to General Assistance, with proposed changes to flexibility and eligibility
- Cuts to the MaineCare Savings Program, which provides critical assistance to ensure older Mainers (who are often also caregivers) can meet their basic needs

Finally, MCA would urge the committee to reject the proposed \$107 million to be reserved in savings for future costs. This is in fact the purpose of the Rainy Day Fund, which is already at capacity and available should it be needed. Too many Maine children and their families are experiencing significant hardship right now, with rising costs for food, housing, and other basic needs. Rather than create additional savings, we would suggest the committee consider current opportunities to alleviate stress on children and their families by allocating those resources to the supports and services that are critical to their health and well-being now and for their future success.