

In- Support LD 210 Budget

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and honorable members of both the Appropriations & Financial Affairs and Education & Cultural Affairs Committees,

I'm Joanne Grant, Sweetser's Chief Growth Officer and I'm speaking in favor of budget with a request to enhance support for addressing the youth mental health crisis we are currently experiencing.

As I am sure you are aware, the latest Kids Count data book paints a worrisome picture of the mental health of our youth. Study after study, report after report, all point to the same conclusion: We are in the midst of a youth mental health crisis. I know you know this all too well. Last year, we placed clinicians in over 100 Maine public schools in over 25 school districts including elementary, middle, and high schools. Our clinicians work directly with students and their families in their schools, homes, and within the community, collaborating with school officials, educators, and guidance counselors to support students' mental health needs and healthy growth. We had been helping over 2,000 children from Kittery to Bangor.

Last session, we were before you detailing of the potential cuts facing Maine schools if LD 2002 wasn't passed and funded, a temporary gap funding measure to stabilize school-based therapy until a longer term funding mechanism could be implemented. Sweetser was sadly forced to make good on that promise.

The funding model for this service is sadly broken. We had to absorb an FY loss of \$1.3 million just for our school-based program. This is simply not sustainable for anyone. We made the tough decision to downsize and pull back support for Maine families and currently operate in only 42 schools with continued plans not to replace clinicians as they vacate positions. This has meant serving less youth in need of treatment, less access to behavioral health services for families where services are already hard to find or get to, and less support for educators and school officials who are grappling with ever expanded roles to meet the needs at their institutions.

This is the best form of prevention we have, embedded on school campuses and working alongside dedicated public school staff members to reach those with the highest needs. The cost to do nothing far exceeds the drop in the bucket that is needed now. The cost of public safety, incarceration, adult mental health services, and the like would far exceed the cost of stabilizing mental health in our public schools. The cost to school districts to fill the gap left behind would also be too great.

Sweetser believes in the preventative promise of in-school mental health services. Early access to treatment is a crucial prevention tool for subsequent mental health challenges. It is well established that children who receive high-quality support early in life have better outcomes down the line in terms of the burden on juvenile/criminal justice systems and the need for higher, more costly levels of care like hospitals, ERs, and out-of-state placements. For many, however, accessing care and services is quite challenging, and that is one of many reasons we support school-based clinician programs across our state.

We need to meet this moment, for countless Maine children and families in your district who either can't access services or could soon lose services if we do nothing. This isn't just Sweetser, all providers are under the same strain, making tough decisions about the viability of the future of these critical services to your constituents.

Thank you for your time and consideration in your deliberations. You will be hearing more about potential solutions in the coming weeks.

Sincerely,

Joanne Grant
Chief Growth Officer