

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Kristen DeForge, and I work for DHHS as a foster care licensing worker (community care worker I am here on my own time to speak in about staffing issues and the need to provide resources for funding to support the immediate needs of workers and children at the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) in the Biennial Budget, LD 210.

I have been employed with the department for 5 ½ years. I got into this work as I feel passionate about supporting resource homes and the children they are caring for. I have also been a licensed foster parent for 19 years.

I am hoping to encourage you to support legislation that better supports our youth in care by avoiding the need to house youth in hotel rooms. This is an immediate crisis, and we need an immediate solution. We need several professionally staffed homes across the state (Bridge homes) that can care properly for children that are not able to stay in a licensed resource home. We have children that have significant behavioral needs and locating resource homes for them is incredibly difficult. It can take a long time to locate a resource home for children in our care, or to locate a residential treatment program. It doesn't have to be this way. If we have a safe home that's staffed by trained professionals, where children can go until they stabilize, this would alleviate stress on children and staff.

Continuing to house children in hotels across the state is not safe for the children or staff of OCFS who are mandated to care for them. These children have OCFS workers rotating in and out every four hours. This provides them with no consistency and is incredibly confusing for them. We are not able to cook them healthy meals and instead they eat fast food or other unhealthy options. Committed, caring and seasoned staff are leaving OCFS because of the added stress of long-mandated hotel shifts in the middle of the night and on the weekends in addition to our already heavy workload. So many of us have lost hope that a change will be made. This is not okay. We are tired, scared for our safety and that of the most vulnerable children we are caring for. Help us restore our hope that these problems will be fixed – help us improve quality of care and humane treatment these kids deserve.

We are not trained in how to respond when a child is in a mental health/behavioral health crisis. We are not trained in administering medications including psychotropic medications. There have been many incidents across the state where youth in crisis become physically aggressive and assault staff members. I myself was physically assaulted during a hotel shift almost three years ago. We need to do better for our highest needs youth in foster care. Continuing to house youth in hotels is damaging to children and unsafe for OCFS staff. Staff have been voicing their concern over this practice for several years, but no one has implemented a solution to avoid this practice.

I urge you all to secure resources for the immediate needs of Maine children taken care of by the Office of Child and Family Services in LD210. Thank you for listening to my concerns.