

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 Bernice "Bunny" Wermenchuk. I have been with DHHS for 7 years. Prior to working for the State of Maine, I worked 29 years for one of Maine's largest Mental Health Facilities – Sweetser. I write to you all to express the need for funding to support the immediate needs related to the hoteling of children at the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) in the Biennial Budget, LD 210.

My position with the Office of Child and Family Services is as a Community Care Worker. I help individuals and couples who are interested in becoming licensed foster parents through the State of Maine. I have always enjoyed working with children and families. In this role I am allowed to help children connect with and be part of a family. Whether placement is with relatives or strangers who want to be loving parents to a child.

My current case load is 63 foster homes and I have 16 new homes interested in becoming licensed. Of my licensed foster homes over 70 % are relative placements. In other words, children are placed with relatives who have their license. Of the 63 homes only 9 are therapeutic foster homes. Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) homes work with mental health programs such as Spurwink, Woodfords, and Kidspace. These programs are there to provide clinical support to foster parents who care for our most difficult and behaviorally challenging children. Currently all 9 of my TFC homes is full, with our highest Level of Care children. The lack of funding will disrupt these placements. Foster parents will not get the clinical support needed within their homes. Children will end up in crisis and end up in Emergency Departments (ED's) or Crisis Units, which is costly. And ultimately we will lose our TFC homes due to the lack of clinical supports. As of right now, a child in the ED requires a staff member to be at the hospital during the length of their stay until either they no longer meet the level of care or a crisis unit space becomes available. Cost to the state: overtime pay, travel expenses, with impacts burnout.

Or foster parents are asking for the child to be removed from their home because they cannot manage the child's behaviors. This creates another expensive cost to the state. Children are having to spend their night/s in a hotel because no foster home will take them due to their behaviors.

Imagine being 12 years old and you have 2 DHHS staff who take you to a hotel room at 5 pm. Dinner might be McDonald's, a can of Chef Boyardee Ravioli or something that is frozen which can be heated in the microwave for dinner. There are plenty of snacks like chips and dip, crackers and peanut butter and gator aid or juice boxes. Healthy foods are not a priority due to the lack of a proper kitchen such as a stove or refrigerator. If you are lucky the hotel might have a pool that you can go swimming in before bed but mostly you are playing card games with staff in the room, or get to play on your electronics, or watch TV. You are now told it's time for bed but you are in a room with two queen-size beds and two strangers watching you while you lay there trying to sleep. You wake up around 2 am to use the bathroom and realized there are 2 different staff who have replaced the two people you were with earlier. They will introduce themselves but you won't remember their names. You go back to bed but you don't really sleep well because you do not know these 2 new staff people in the room. Sometime around 7 am you hear your name being called and you are being told to wake up. You realized that

the two people that when you woke up in the middle of the night are now replaced with two different staff. And you have no idea what the rest of your day is going to be like.

Hoteling is not in the best interest of any child. Hoteling offers no stability, structure, or security. There is no privacy or a sense of belonging. Without a place to cook and refrigerate food, meals provide no nutritional benefits or offers no ability to learn life skills. The cost to the state to hotel for one night: 1 hotel room, roughly \$25 for food and drinks for the child, overtime pay for staffing. If the state is lucky some of the staff might be through the contracted agency that they are already paid for. And lastly, travel expenses to and from the hotel for the staff. And that is for 1 child in 1 county. Currently some counties are hoteling multiple children for multiple nights. Hoteling and ED covering is the number one cause of burnout amongst OCFS staff along with high case load.

Roughly 20 years ago, programs like Sweetser and Spurwink had contracts with the state to provide a program called bridge homes. These were homes that were scattered throughout the state and in communities that provided a nurturing, homelike structure for children in custody. These programs were designed for two reasons: 1st for children who came into care in the evening or weekend giving the department time to locate family members who would take the child/ren in their homes. Or for children who struggled emotionally and behaviorally in their foster homes and needed to be removed or have respite. These homes were meant to be a placement for children up to 45 days. The programs had a full-time supervisor, clinician, an assistant supervisor who was responsible for the children's educational needs, and several full-time staff that covered the home 24 hours a day. The staff also assisted in covering visits as part of their reunification plans. They also helped coordinate and transport children to medical, dental, and mental health appointments as needed. They worked closely with the children's case worker and were part of the DHHS team.

It is my understanding that when the contracts ended for the bridge homes so did the funding. Instead, we are putting children in hotels children. We do not have enough regular or TFC homes to handle the number of children currently in care in the State of Maine. Back in January of 2024, Director Johnson had proposed that each county have a Specialized Therapeutic Foster Home designated to take in the acute emotional and behavioral difficult children. This home would be licensed for only one or two children. Their daily rate of pay would be in the range of \$300 a day with the requirement that one of the foster parents would not work outside of the home. Unfortunately, no foster home in York county was willing to participate in Director Johnson's proposal.

Hoteling and covering ED has become the burden of the OCFS direct staff. After-hour coverage is not conducive to a good work/life balance. It has caused stress, burnout, and has affected work performance. Each district has had an increase in turnover and vacancy.