

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Megan Taft, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Rural Youth Institute. I am submitting testimony in strong support of LD 802, An Act Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Design a Mentoring Program for Youth with Extended Care and Support Agreements.

The Rural Youth Institute brings more than 50 years of collective leadership experience in designing and implementing high-impact, evidence-based mentoring programs. Our work ensures that young people have a consistent network of support that carries them through pivotal years of growth and transition. When young people have stable, caring relationships throughout their formative years, they don't just imagine a better future—they build one.

Decades of research confirm that the single most important factor in a young person's success is a meaningful, consistent connection with a caring adult. These mentoring relationships provide youth with a critical sense of being seen, heard, and valued—the foundation of belonging and the first step toward building aspirations that feel both possible and attainable.

Youth aging out of the foster care system are particularly vulnerable when they lack adequate resources and support. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, young people who emancipate from foster care face the challenge of transitioning to adulthood without family or systemic support. Compared to their peers, they are at significantly higher risk for behavioral, mental, and physical health issues, as well as housing instability, unemployment, academic struggles, early parenthood, and substance abuse.

A six-year longitudinal study conducted by the University of Southern Maine's Data Innovation Project on the Rural Youth Institute's mentoring model demonstrated statistically significant positive outcomes, including higher aspirations, stronger academic achievement, greater resilience, and a deeper sense of belonging among participants. This research reinforces national studies on the power of mentoring while also highlighting the impact of successful mentoring programs right here in rural Maine.

This work is not about "fixing" individual young people; it is about investing in and creating environments where youth are surrounded by a network of caring adults who support them in building meaningful, aspirational pathways to a successful future.

On behalf of the Rural Youth Institute, I thank you for your time and respectfully urge your support for LD 802.

Megan Taft

Rural Youth Institute  
Alna, Maine