

Testimony: Cindy Seekins, a parent who has raised children with emotional and behavioral health concerns in support of LD 1060, April 4, 2025

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee

DHHS and MCWAN partnered with parents and caregivers (this means the process was Family Driven) to develop the "**Be There for ME**" website which was launched in July 2024 as a response to the feedback from parents and community partners who identified stigma as the significant barrier to parents in reaching out for and receiving of support. I participated in the **Be There for ME** development campaign in my role as a parent who has raised children with behavioral health concerns and with also having the knowledge of the experiences of other parents in Maine as the Director of a Statewide Parent Support Network whose parent family peer staff provide 1:1 in home support to parents of children/youth with emotional and behavioral health concerns.

Our task was to help to increase awareness of existing resources, remove the stigma associated with asking for help and to promote seeking help as a strength. As a parent I have the lived experience of feeling the isolation, stigma and of being shamed and judged for my children who have emotional and behavioral health needs. I was not aware of any resources for support and then I saw a simple advertisement for a "support group for parents of children with special needs". I truly wanted to attend, but then I would have to face the stigma and shame. Because of that stigma, it took me many months to have the courage to put aside those feelings to attend this support group and when I did, I received that nonjudgmental support and validation that I was a good parent. In retrospect, if the wording of the advertisement had been more supportive and encouraging I likely would have attended much sooner.

Parenting children is the toughest job you can ever have. The **Be There for ME** website is a needed resource for parents and is very critical to help to meet the many needs of families today. I was so appreciative of the openness to the "wording used" that was kind and supportive and removed the stigma, shame, blame and judgment that would help parents like myself to want to reach out sooner for assistance. THAT IS EXACTLY what parents need to see and feel when finding resources to make them feel safe and to encourage them to take the next step sooner. The **Be There for ME** website makes it more normalized to actually reach out for help and to contact the resources listed which can easily be accessed from any parents' phone. Best yet, there are no "key words" you have to already know to enter on that site in search for what you need.

If you are looking for cost effective resources that also truly meet the needs of the many, **Be There for ME** website is that resource. Currently, families have few places to get the professional help their children and youth need when they need it because of all the lengthy waitlists. This website contains many resources that do not have waitlists and that could help families increase their natural supports while increasing the resiliency factors for the entire family. I strongly support and encourage you to support the cost-effective request for additional funding maintenance of the **Be There for ME** website.

Respectfully submitted,

Cindy Seekins