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Testimony in Support of LD 1406 An Act to Amend Certain Definitions in the Child and Family Services and Child Protection Act

Heidi Aakjer, Executive Director, Maine Children's Trust, April 8, 2025

Good afternoon, Sen. Ingwerson, Rep. Meyer, and Distinguished Committee Members, my name is Heidi Aakjer and I'm the Executive Director of Maine Children's Trust. **Maine Children's Trust** is a 501(c)3 non-profit governed by a Board of Directors. The Trust provides leadership and coordination of efforts throughout Maine to prevent child abuse and neglect. We are the only statewide organization solely focused on preventing child abuse and neglect before it occurs. Our mission is to strengthen families, promote healthy relationships, and support communities to prevent child abuse and neglect. Simply put - child abuse prevention means strengthening child and family well-being, which keeps children safe.

Maine Children's Trust has supported the **Maine Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Councils** (informally known as the Maine Prevention Councils) since the 1990s through grants, awareness, and technical assistance. Since 2008, DHHS has partnered with the Trust to lead and coordinate statewide child abuse prevention efforts. In 2015, DHHS provided funding to establish a formal statewide infrastructure for the Maine Prevention Councils, which statutorily serve as county-level coordinators for prevention programs and supports. Through contracts with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Trust is responsible for providing the oversight and the system supports for the Maine Prevention Councils. This includes management, technical assistance, quality assurance and improvement, data collection, reporting, as well as oversight of training to local professionals. The Maine Prevention Councils are the designated entity to provide local professionals with the state-approved Mandated Reporting for the last ten years. **Last fiscal year alone, the Prevention Councils trained 2,092 professionals in Mandated Reporting who work directly with families in Maine showcasing the importance of this proposed legislation and the positive impact it could make on children and families.**

Defining poverty versus neglect would encourage Mandated Reporters to distinguish between poverty and neglect to avoid overreporting and ensure that resources are directed toward families facing genuine risk, rather than those struggling with financial hardship. A family's inability to feed, clothe, or house their children is often perceived as child neglect, even though this inability may be a result of the family experiencing poverty. Instead of focusing solely on identifying and reporting potential abuse or neglect, this change would build trust and provide support to families, recognizing that many situations can be addressed through community-based resources rather than immediate intervention by child protective services. As community-based providers, the Maine Prevention Councils are uniquely positioned *to train and support Mandated Reporters* to foster a more collaborative and supportive approach, moving away from an approach that can misidentify poverty for neglect isolating families even more. Mandated Reporters (like teachers, child care, health professionals, family advocates, etc.) would then begin to be seen as a source of information and connection for families versus a group of people to avoid asking for help. I strongly urge you to support LD 1406 on behalf of children and families across Maine.

