

April 8, 2025



Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty and Representative Murphy and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Abbey O'Connor at Spurwink Services. I am a resident of Brunswick Maine.

I am here today to speak to you regarding LD 858 - An Act to Ensure Behavioral and Mental Health Services Are Available to Students by Providing Grants to Schools That Contract for Those Services.

I am writing to express my unequivocal support for LD 858, an initiative that seeks to allocate essential grant funds to schools across Maine for contracting behavioral health services. The mental health crisis facing our children is a pressing reality that deserves immediate attention, and this initiative is critical in ensuring that our youth receive the support they so desperately need.

My name is Abbey O'Connor, and I have been a licensed social worker for 20 years at Spurwink, focusing my work on children services in our communities and schools. Our children have been exposed to a distressing array of traumatic experiences, including witnessing drug overdoses, domestic violence, abuse, suicides, and the ever-present threat of violence in their communities, particularly in Lewiston. I have watched the referrals for counseling for children shift through my 20 years from a student with ADHD who cannot maintain attention in a classroom, to recent years of witnessing a parent death due to an overdose or suicide. These experiences have left indelible scars on their mental health, making it imperative that we address their needs with urgency and compassion.

Access to mental health services should not be a privilege; it should be a fundamental right for every child. Unfortunately, the current landscape of outpatient mental health services is fraught with long waitlists, agency doors closing, and barriers that prevent timely access to care. Many families are unable to navigate these challenges, leaving our children without the support they need when they need it most. By providing behavioral health services within the school setting, we can eliminate these barriers and ensure that children can access vital counseling and support directly where they spend the majority of their time. As the outpatient/section 65 rates currently stand, they are not sufficient in maintaining programs and are leading to closures or reductions in service size. The state has put forward investment in rate changes for specific evidence-based models of treatment. As these models have an important role, they require specific criteria for it to be appropriate and indicated for the youth. Our youth are living in crisis and survival every day, and therefore these models are not appropriate for 90% of a clinician's caseload. Our children are living in a home where there is a real fear a family member is going to show up with a gun and kill them, parents are actively using substances, are homeless and living in a tent, showing up to school with bruises or reports of sexual abuse, and the list goes on. These are real examples from the youth we serve. School based clinical services need funding that allows for flexibility in how we provide treatment to ensure it meets the needs of the client and sustains the service.

It is time for us to prioritize the mental health of our children and invest in their futures. By supporting LD 858, we are taking a significant step toward creating a healthier, more supportive environment for

our youth. We owe it to them to provide the resources they need to heal and thrive in the face of adversity.

Thank you for your time and consideration for this crucial issue and for considering the well-being of our children in Maine.

Sincerely,
Abbey O'Connor, LCSW
Spurwink Services
Lewiston, Maine