



Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Testimony in Support of:

L.D. 858, An Act to Ensure Behavioral and Mental Health Services Are Available to Students by Providing Grants to Schools That Contract for Those Services

and

L.D. 1203, An Act to Provide Grants to Schools That Contract for Behavioral and Mental Health Services

April 8, 2025

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Heide Lester, and I am the Deputy Director of EqualityMaine, which has been advocating on behalf of Maine's LGBTQ+ community since 1984. We strongly support legislation that ensures support for behavioral and mental health services for our youth.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth experience depression symptoms and suicidal thoughts at significantly higher rates than their cisgender and heterosexual peers: according to 2023 MIYHS data, 57% of LGBTQ+ high schoolers reported that their mental health was not good "most of the time" or "always" in the last 30 days compared to 25% of non-LGBTQ+ students.¹ It is important to note that LGBTQ+ young people are not inherently prone to higher suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but rather are placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated in society. Health disparities among LGBTQ+ people are linked to stigma and discrimination - many in the LGBTQ+ community face prejudice, denial of civil and human rights, harassment, and family rejection, which can lead to new or worsened symptoms of mental health, particularly for those with intersecting racial or socioeconomic identities.² While in some cases, LGBTQ+ people access mental health care more frequently than non-LGBTQ+ people, their need for services is greater, and policies seeking to curtail access and rights of LGBTQ+ people threaten to worsen these disparities.

¹ "High School Detailed Report," Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey, 2023, maine.gov/miyhs/sites/default/files/2023_Reports/Detailed_Reports/HS/MIYHS2023_Detailed_Reports_HS_State/Maine%20High%20School%20Detailed%20Tables.pdf.

² Jennifer Kates, Usha Ranji. "Health and Access to Care and Coverage for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Individuals in the U.S." KFF, 3 May 2018, www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/health-and-access-to-care-and-coverage-for-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-individuals-in-the-u-s/.

According to The Trevor Project's 2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People in Maine, nearly half of LGBTQ+ young people who wanted mental health care in the past year were not able to get it.³ The barriers to accessing behavioral health services that young people face particularly in Maine include cost, long travel distances, and limited transportation options, as well as the fact that Maine is experiencing critical shortages in its behavioral health workforce, especially for clinicians. In a January-February 2024 point-in-time survey, 50 behavioral health organizations and 277 behavioral health clinicians across Maine provided data on access to care and workforce issues, with 20 agencies reporting clinician vacancies of over 20%. Nearly 13,000 patients were seeking an individual provider, mental health counseling, or prescribing services in Maine, and, shockingly, waiting an average of eight months for care. And while The Trevor Project recently found LGBTQ+ youth in Maine are at heightened risk of depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts (often stemming from bullying and discrimination), agencies are reporting that clinical positions for school- or home-based services for youth are the hardest to recruit and retain staff.

We respectfully urge the Committee to vote "Ought to Pass" on L.D. 858 and L.D. 1203 in order to support the mental health needs of Maine's students.

Thank you,

Heide Lester (they/them)

³ "2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People in Maine," *The Trevor Project*, 28 Feb. 2025, www.thetrevorproject.org/state-reports-maine-2024/.