

Testimony In Support of LD 1703: Resolve, to Establish the Adverse Childhood Experiences Screening and Resiliency Assessment Pilot Project

Dear Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. My name is Judy Peters. I am a licensed clinical social worker and a resident of York. I have been working for over a decade in the area of children's mental health, including in schools and private practice. I am representing NASW Maine, testifying in strong support for LD 1703: "Resolve, to Establish the Adverse Childhood Experiences Screening and Resiliency Assessment Pilot Project." This bill would provide an important opportunity to implement and test trauma and resiliency screening for students in school-based health centers representing rural, urban, and suburban districts across Maine. It would also offer valuable trauma-informed training for social workers engaged with school students that could be used towards meeting continuing education licensure requirements.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are known to have the potential for long-lasting negative effects on children's learning, development, and mental health, including anxiety and depression. The importance of trauma-informed care in mental health treatment is well established and consistent with social work values and standards. This legislation would help social workers recognize and respond to ACEs early on in the clinical process, improve sensitivity to trauma survivors, advance trauma-informed practices, and build targeted interventions within treatment plans. It would assist in ensuring that children and youth are provided with comprehensive care, taking into account both safety and protective factors, along with the resources affected students may need to heal and thrive. Screening has a further benefit of being preventative in that early intervention for ACEs may mitigate the need for more intensive mental health supports later on.

In the 2023-2024 academic year, I conducted a research study with elementary school social workers across the state caring for students with anxiety since the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of my findings, the vast majority of respondents (80%) relayed disturbing stories of traumatic circumstances experienced by students within their caseloads, including reports of children's exposure to domestic violence, neglect, caregiver addiction, and related deaths, along with physical/sexual abuse. Further reinforcing these concerns are current data that indicate 20-25% of Maine's children aged 6-17 experience 2 or more adverse childhood experiences. Recent child abuse and neglect rates in Maine have also been found to be over twice the national rate. Taken together, these realities emphasize the desperate need for ACEs screening. In summary, I can attest to the value of this legislation that would provide social workers with a crucial tool they need to quickly and effectively identify, assess, and address the complexities of symptoms due to trauma that may otherwise go unnoticed. It would further essential treatment that incorporates a trauma-informed lens and lend important insights to the prevalence and nature of ACEs among students seeking health care in our state.

We urge the committee to vote "ought to pass" on this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

Judy Peters, PhD
Member, NASW ME Policy Committee

Julie Schirmer, LCSW, ACSW
President, NASW ME Board of Directors

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