

LD 1745, An Act to Stabilize Residential Treatment Capacity for Children and Youth in Maine Presented to Maine's Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

As a leading organization representing providers of children's mental health services, the National Association of Social Workers, Maine Chapter (NASW ME) **supports** LD 1745 to stabilize our in-state residential treatment capacity for our youth.

Our mental health system throughout Maine has consistently struggled to meet the needs of our communities. Over the last decade, and exacerbated by the pandemic, our resources have crumbled, leaving a trail of disaster behind. Our children have experienced the brunt of this catastrophe, with more providers shying away from working with this difficult population. Children's mental health cases are complex and can be heart-wrenching. When mental health services are not accessible locally, children spend days or weeks in emergency departments, where they do not belong; or we ship them hours or states away to try to receive the appropriate care, only further complicating their situation. Dr. Judy Peters' recent research shows a drastic increase in anxiety and depression in Maine's youth. Educators are reporting significant increases in dangerous, risky, and anti-social behavior in the classrooms, which is distracting and taking away from classroom teaching.

Aroostook is a prime example of what is to come for the rest of the state if we do not change course. The severe lack of outpatient services leads to children in crisis with no one available to help. Then we ask families to care for them until they can't keep them safe, and then higher levels of care are needed. Our emergency departments are not equipped for these cases. So parents are asked to stay for days or weeks at the hospital with their child until something in their presentation changes or a placement is identified. Emergency department visits by children in a mental health crisis are expensive and not the best use of our resources. To make matters worse, Aroostook currently has no crisis units, inpatient psychiatric beds or residential care facilities for children, meaning they are sending them hours away to keep them safe. When short-term treatment does not help, providers seek residential treatment and when in-state facilities are not available or able to meet the needs, children are referred throughout New England. When that doesn't work, children are sent to states like Georgia, Arkansas, or Missouri. This is detrimental to the child and family and slows their healing and treatment. Currently, there are approximately 68 Maine children in out-of-state residential placements.

Over the past few years, residential programs have identified increased costs of care and workforce challenges as their biggest barriers. Our Behavioral Health Access and Workforce Summit data from providers and organizations throughout the state highlight these challenges for the entire spectrum of institutions.

LD 1745 includes a multi-faceted approach to address these systemic issues. By investigating the barriers to successful in-state residential treatment and then investing in their stabilization for the short term, many children and families will be positively affected. The state has been spending millions of dollars on the treatment of our children in other states. It is time to invest in our own backyard and communities to support our behavioral health institutions, workforce, families, and children.

Please vote "ought to pass on this important piece of legislation.

Best,

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Member, Policy Committee, NASW ME

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

ABOUT NASW-ME: The NASW-Maine Chapter, the leading professional social work organization in the state with over 1000 members, is committed to advancing professional social work practice. Comprising professionals with Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degrees in social work, as well as Associate members from related fields, the chapter supports its members across diverse settings such as community mental health centers, family service agencies,

schools, hospitals, courts, and a variety of other public and private agencies. Social workers are recognized as one of the four core mental health professions, addressing a broad range of issues including mental illness, substance abuse, and social injustice, working directly with individuals and families and engaging in policy, administration, and research.

References:

Peters, J. (2024)). *“The Pressure of Unmet Needs”: Elementary School Social Workers Lived Experiences Caring for Students with Anxiety since the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Doctoral dissertation, Simmons University).