

Testimony of Melissa Hackett  
Policy Associate, Maine Children's Alliance  
Coordinator, Maine Child Welfare Action Network  
In support of LD 1893, An Act to Establish an Independent Office of the Child Advocate  
May 9, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Melissa Hackett. I offer testimony today on behalf of the Maine Children's Alliance and Maine Child Welfare Action Network, in support of this legislation.

For several years now, legislation has come forward proposing greater or different oversight, particularly related to the child welfare system. We have often weighed in on these proposals, generally to provide information on how they could be strengthened.

In the past, we have emphasized concerns around a focus on one population of children and youth alone. As this committee is well aware, there are concerns not only about children involved with the child welfare system, but also related to children with behavioral health needs, and those involved with the juvenile justice system. A siloed approach to these children and youth, who often experience similar challenges that lead them to involvement with multiple systems, constrains our ability to see the broader issues that impact their safety and well-being. We appreciate the approach this proposal provides to consider youth across these issue areas, which should provide greater insight into recommendations for systems improvement that will benefit many children and youth.

We also support the independence and advisory structure of this office, to ensure many perspectives are involved and informed of systems issues. This is strengthened by reporting to multiple entities, as well as information sharing and confidentiality agreements that should ensure the office has the information it needs to assess issues across systems, while protecting the privacy of the children, youth, and families it serves.

Perhaps most notably, we appreciate how this office could expand the work of the existing Child Welfare Ombudsman. The idea of expanding this office has been raised before, without a supported pathway and structure for doing so. This bill creates that pathway. It is an opportunity for the office not simply to respond to complaints, but to provide more substantive support and referrals to families engaged with the office. This is something we often hear is particularly needed (and lacking) by parents who are navigating the child welfare system.

We recognize significant work by multiple partners has gone into the development of this policy proposal. It echoes good ideas that have been raised in past legislative

conversations around strengthening our ability to understand and respond to systemic challenges impacting the safety and well-being of children and youth in Maine. We hope the committee will support this legislation as a strong step forward in bringing together oversight of groups of youth involved with complex systems; this should strengthen our ability to understand the challenges and develop solutions to better address their needs.

Thank you.