

May 9, 2025

Senator Henry Ingwersen
Representative Michele Meyer
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
100 State House Station, Cross Building Room 209
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: LD 1893, An Act to Establish an Independent Office of the Child Advocate

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Jill Ward, and I am a resident of Portland, Maine. I have worked on juvenile justice policy and reform for more than 20 years and for the past decade have served as a policy consultant on juvenile justice and children's issues both nationally and here in Maine. Most recently, I served as a Senior Policy Advisor to the Administrator at the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Currently, I direct the Maine Center for Youth Policy at Maine Law and have been involved in efforts to reform Maine's youth justice system, including serving as one of three co-chairs of the 2019 Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment and Reinvestment Task Force.¹ My testimony represents my personal views only and not the position of the University of Maine School of Law or the University of Maine System.

One of the main areas of my work has been educating policy makers, stakeholders and the public about the harmful effects of justice system involvement, particularly incarceration, on children and youth and what works to reduce recidivism and produce positive outcomes for young people and their communities. The negative impacts on child-wellbeing from both formal juvenile justice system processing and subsequent confinement are well-documented, including the increased risk of abuse and violence,² educational disruption,³ poor health outcomes as adults,⁴ and harmful family and community separation. We also know that these harms fall disproportionately on youth of color, girls, LGBTQ GNC youth, and youth with disabilities. By expanding the scope of the Child Welfare Ombudsman to include youth involved in the justice system, LD 1893 would help to mitigate the harmful effects of system involvement and provide more equitable protection for children and youth in state care.

Currently, there is no independent oversight of Maine's juvenile justice system or of the Department of Corrections, which oversees the care of youth in its custody. Unlike children, youth, and families involved in the child welfare system, who receive protection and services through the Child Welfare Ombudsman, **youth and families involved in the juvenile justice system have no independent agency to provide**

¹ For more information see, www.mainejitaskforce.org.

² See, *Maltreatment in Youth in U.S. Correctional Facilities*. (2015). Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation and *Conditions of Confinement: Findings from the survey of youth in residential placement*. (2010). Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

³ See, *Just Learning*. (2014). Atlanta, GA: Southern Education Fund. See also, *Juvenile Reentry*. (2014) Washington, D.C.: Federal Interagency Reentry Council which found that "approximately two-thirds of young people do not return to school after release from secure custody."

⁴ Barnett, E. et al. (April 2019). *What Is the Relationship Between Incarceration of Children and Adult Health Outcomes?* American Pediatrics. Volume 19, Issue 3, Pages 342–350, which found, "child incarceration independently predicted adult mobility limitations, adult depression and adult suicidal thoughts."

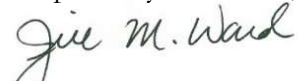
similar protections and oversight. This is particularly troubling when considering that many children and youth are involved in more than one system. For example, the 2020 Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment found that more than two-thirds of the youth committed to Long Creek Youth Development Center had received behavioral health services through MaineCare in the year prior to their commitment and 65 percent of these youth had a history of child welfare involvement with 20 percent having had at least one removal from their home.⁵ Bringing oversight of all children and youth under one entity will allow for a more consistent and equitable response to youth needs and better support a more holistic approach to child well-being.

Establishment of an independent office to oversee all children and youth in state custody would bring Maine in line with national best practice. A majority of states provide oversight of all child-serving systems through an independent ombudsman or an Office of the Child Advocate.⁶ New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut have Child Advocates who oversee youth in all youth-serving agencies, including juvenile justice. LD 1893 would ensure that **all children under state care in Maine are protected** and the agencies who have authority over them are held accountable.

The needs of youth and young adults involved in the justice system are the same needs of vulnerable youth involved in the child welfare, children's behavioral health, or education systems: stable housing, supportive adults, positive peer supports, education, mental health services, substance use treatment, life skills and job training. Research suggests that aligning structures and activities that respond to the needs of all children, youth, and families will improve outcomes and, ultimately, cost less in the long run.⁷

LD 1893 would appropriately expand the current authority of the Child Welfare Ombudsman to give a needed voice for all children under the care and custody of the state and should be approved.

Respectfully submitted,



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⁵ Center for Children's Law and Policy et al. (February 2020). [Maine Juvenile justice System Assessment](#).

⁶ See National Council of State Legislatures at <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/childrens-ombudsman-offices-office-of-the-child-advocate>

⁷ Sanchez, M. King, E., & Ward, J. (March 2019). *Place Matters: Aligning Investments in a Community-based Continuum of Care for Maine Youth Transitioning to Adulthood*. University of Southern Maine and Maine Center for Juvenile Policy and Law.