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5/15/2025

Senator Ingwersen, Chair
Representative Meyer, Chair
Members, Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0100

Re: LD 1859 – *An Act to Improve Access to Child Care and Early Childhood Education by Establishing Regional Resource Hubs*

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information in opposition to LD 1859, *An Act to Improve Access to Child Care and Early Childhood Education by Establishing Regional Resource Hubs*.

This bill would require OCFS to establish contracts with community providers to serve as early learning and developmental resource hubs. These hubs would provide families with information and support to locate early childhood programs, assist families in connecting with other services and supports, facilitate training of child care staff, and build networks around and among child care providers. The bill allocates funding from federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) to this program, as well as general fund dollars. A 50% local match is also required. The bill also includes a position to oversee this program, which would be funded with CCDF dollars. OCFS would be required to report annually to this Committee, the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, and the Children's Cabinet on the status of this program.

OCFS is opposed to this bill due to the significant overlap with several existing initiatives (First4ME, Help Me Grow, and the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan) and because this bill seeks to obligate CCDF funding which is not available due to Maine's significant investments in existing initiatives. OCFS recognizes that regional coordination and direct engagement with parents at a community level could be beneficial for children and families but believes focus should remain on existing investments. This bill would also require an investment of general fund dollars that might be better spent ensuring families have access to affordable child care in light of the existing waiting list for the Child Care Affordability Program (CCAP).

First4ME is a pilot project to create opportunities to improve the social, emotional, educational, and health outcomes for children under the age of six and their families. The pilot utilizes a two-generation approach that integrates comprehensive resources and services into traditional child care programs in a manner intended to improve family outcomes. The pilot began in August of 2023 and will conclude in July of next year. The pilot also includes an evaluation component, the

outcome of which will be key to decisions regarding the long-term sustainability of the existing pilot sites and the possibility of expanding the program. OCFS is hesitant to create new programs or expand additional programs that overlap with First4ME until the evaluation is complete, the impact of First4ME can be determined, and consideration can be given to whether it is worthwhile to expand the pilot further. First4ME has four goals, each of which align closely with the proposal under this bill:

1. Increase high-quality care and education;
2. Develop a coordinated system of support for families, providers, schools, and communities;
3. Strengthen consistent continuity of care for children from birth to school age; and
4. Increase successful early learning transitions for children as they enter kindergarten.

Help Me Grow is a free informational service linking families and professionals to information about child development, pregnancy, and community resources for children and families. The intent is to strengthen the knowledge of the services available for children and families and build connections between families and providers to ensure an accessible and interconnected system of support for families. Part of the intent of this bill is to develop hubs to help connect parents to and raise awareness of local and state resources, which is a significant area of overlap between this proposal and the existing Help Me Grow program.

OCFS has been very involved in the development and implementation of Maine's Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan which includes a number of initiatives aimed at providing support for families and enhancing the accessibility of resources and services statewide. For example, the Be There for ME website was developed as part of the plan. The website helps to connect families with existing services and opportunities for support within their communities. Another example is the Maine Children's Trust and Maine Prevention Councils which are in the process of further developing Family Resource Centers which serve as regionalized hubs that provide community-based spaces for families where they can access services and supports to increase protective factors (parental resilience, social connections, parenting knowledge, connections to supports, etc.)

LD 1859 also requires the proposed regional hubs provide training for child care staff. Maine already provides robust support for professional development through funding directed to Maine's Professional Development Network (PDN). Provider engagement with PDN has increased with implementation of another strategic state investment in the child care industry, the Early Childhood Educator Salary Supplement Program.

OCFS appreciates the focus of this bill on regionalizing support for families statewide and ensuring those families have access to a more direct resource that can help them connect to child care providers in their area. OCFS has been very involved in the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Strategic Plan, the Child Development Services transition within DOE, and the Children's Cabinet Strategic Plan. In their own way, each of these initiatives has touched on the need for additional regionalized support for providers and families, but it is important to look at current initiatives to make sure we are not duplicating efforts, particularly as this initiative would compete for CCDF administrative funding currently allocated to other programs. OCFS acknowledges that there could be value in a more hands-on and community-specific approach than the childcarechoices.me website can provide. But given limited financial resources and the

broad array of existing programs and initiatives that already exist to support children and families (and occupy available CCDF administrative funding) OCFS does not support implementation of the model outlined in LD 1859 at this time.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions during your deliberation of this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bobbi L. Johnson, LMSW". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bobbi L. Johnson, LMSW
Director
Office of Child and Family Services
Maine Department of Health and Human Services