

Honorable members of The Health and Human Services Committee, I'm Matthew Agren of Lewiston Maine. I have been involved the foster care system, in a kinship case for almost 8 years now. Our child doesn't call my wife Mom or me - Dad, but I am Uncle Matt, which honestly carries more weight in this world than can be imagined.

The State of Maine has the chance to put for serious reform Child Protection Services by adopting Legislative Document No. 555 (SP 217). It would create an independent Department of Child and Family Services with an independent commissioner, separate from DHHS, as proposed by Senator Timberlake. In 2021, former Senator Bill Diamond proposed the same thing, and now leads the non-profit organization Walk a Mile in Their Shoes, which is focused on improving Maine's child welfare system. This is not a Republican or Democrat issue, it is a bipartisan issue that is truly a matter of Child Safety in Maine. I hope that you will all treat this as such and I respectfully ask the committee to vote LD 555 Ought to Pass.

A new department is urgently needed due to the many well documented, serious failures within DHHS/CPS over many years. We as a state owe it to those children who end up in state care to ensure they get best possible care while the State is responsible for them. Too often, there are breakdowns that are not caused directly by either Republican or Democrat politicians, but mostly by the deeply entrenched bureaucratic nightmare that has been created by an overgrown organization which has too many divisions 9, that allows dysfunctions and gaps in the system that cases cannot be effectively managed. How many more children will have to die while in the care of DHHS/OCFS before we make urgent changes to protect them?

Based on the last time this was tried with LD 779, the cost

for this grand scheme of the state budget, I'm guessing still around 4.2 million dollars is not a lot to ask to better ensure the wellbeing and welfare of our children. DHHS has in the past said that they are willing to separate OCFS from their department, after long fighting against it tooth and nail. The separation of CPS from DHHS will shift the focus to prioritizing what is most important - our children. It is imperative that we improve our record of ensuring the wellbeing and welfare of all children in State custody from the moment they enter care.

Now to be fair and honest this is not a magic fix, there needs to be complete buy in by both Republican or Democrat politicians as well as the staff of the new Child and Family Services Department and it's new Commissioner. We are going to need further steps with stronger independent oversight, transparency, and accountability legislation, as well as allowing for the ability for Legislators in the GOC to have the ability to do Honest Oversight via statutory changes of the laws. We all want serious reform and not just renaming or rebranding of the same old bureaucracy. Things need to change and given the many failures that have been brought to light over the past few years, it offers the opportunity for a fresh start for building a new kind of support system for our children and families. This new cabinet-level children's department requires that children and families be kept at the center of the system, which will hopefully reduce the multiple failures that we have seen repeatedly since 2001, such as in Logan Marr's case. I would furthermore like to see this new organization include family court in handling CPS cases, as well as move the youth criminal justice system under the same umbrella.

While this proposal will not directly address the shortage of caseworkers, fewer layers of bureaucracy should make it easier for them to directly interact with management and

carry out timely action to guarantee the safety and wellbeing of children under their care. Systemic improvements should allow them to get the support they need, such as case aides, as well as limit the turnover of staff. A temporary housing site for children taken into State care should be established at the regional level, which would end the use of hotel and ER rooms to house children under caseworker supervision. Should a family court be set up to handle cases, legal aides could assist in seeing that cases be resolved faster, which would also help reduce ongoing caseloads.

This proposal also calls for an independent investigator to investigate child protection operations. This is essential for Kinship and Foster Resource Families along with Biological Families, who currently have no outside support or authority to turn to when there is a problem. Let's be totally honest: many families are afraid or reluctant to speak up because of fear of retaliation against them by DHHS/OCFS if they report case workers and/or contractors who are acting inappropriately, recklessly or who attempt to intentionally intimidate the child, parent or caregiver. This is applicable to concerns of either the biological or the resource parents of the children in State care. There is a serious lack of accountability from DHHS/OCFS because they are not required to follow their own rules and if they step away from them, let's be honest there is no one to hold them accountable. Now here is a question to you all: do any of us truly believe that bureaucratic systems truly want to examine themselves when and if there is a mission failure and find that failure and address properly? Had someone held DHHS/OCFS accountable to their own rules, maybe the Ayla Reynolds tragedy would have been prevented.

Look we all know that no Bill is perfect the 1st time out in the committee, but this is needed. If there are serious issues

that you feel needs to be look at further, that what your session on the bill can look at fixing.