

Testimony of Christine Alberi, Child Welfare Ombudsman  
Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs  
LD 258, State Biennial Budget  
Public Hearing  
February 21, 2022

Good morning, Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs.

My name is Christine Alberi, and I am the Child Welfare Ombudsman for Maine. I am here today to testify in support of the provisions of the proposed biennial budget that support the Office of the Child Welfare Ombudsman.

Maine's Child Welfare Ombudsman program is an independent non-profit authorized by 22 M.R.S.A. § 4087-A to provide information and referrals to individuals requesting assistance with child welfare and to perform case-specific reviews of child welfare involvement. Under the statute the Ombudsman also has a duty to analyze and provide opinions and recommendations to agencies, the Governor, and the Legislature on state programs, rules, policies, and laws.

The Ombudsman's opinions and recommendations are based on our case-specific reports. We receive a complaint from an individual who calls the Ombudsman and then the complaint is referred to the Department. Then we review all of the information relevant to the determination of the complaint, including a response from the Department. A report is drafted, we receive feedback on the report, come to an agreement about the contents of the report, and then finalize the report.

We also provide direct information to the public. For everyone who contacts us, even if we do not complete a case specific review, we can give detailed information about the laws, policies, procedures, and practices in child welfare cases.

The Ombudsman's office was founded as part of child welfare reforms enacted in the wake of the death of Logan Marr, a child who died in foster care in 2001. In its first years, the office was housed in the Maine Children's Alliance. In 2012, in conjunction with a funding reduction, the Ombudsman's office became an independent non-profit with one staff member. I took over as the Ombudsman at the end of 2013. For context as to how the program has grown over the years, a decade ago in fiscal year 2011, there were 282 contacts to the office. In 2013 there were 452, and this past fiscal year, 2022, there were 801 contacts.

In 2019 we were able to add one additional staff member, Associate Ombudsman, Ashley Morrell. Despite this, we were still under resourced for the scope of the work contemplated in the statute. During the last legislative session, additional funding was appropriated in order for us to hire additional staff. This was much needed funding, but we have been struggling to find staff in today's difficult job market.

As you are unfortunately aware, due to recent, highly publicized child deaths, there is increased scrutiny of the child welfare system in general, and specifically the area that we are charged with

reviewing, investigations into the safety of children by the Department of Health and Human Services, and reunification of children and their parents after children have been removed into state custody. We are working closely with the Department to make recommendations for both system improvements and changes and improvements in individual cases in real time. Children in Maine are struggling in unprecedented ways, and the work of the Ombudsman's office is an important piece of solutions for our children who are at the greatest risk.

Thank you for listening to my testimony today, and I am happy to answer any questions.

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