



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MAINE

**Informational Testimony from the Catherine Cutler Institute
at the University of Southern Maine
Presented by Alison Grey, M.S., Policy Associate**

Regarding LD 1092, *An Act to Prevent the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the State*

March 27, 2023

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

My name is Alison Grey, and I am a Policy Associate at the Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine. I lead research and evaluation services for sponsored projects and my content expertise focuses on sexual assault and domestic violence.

In 2019, I led a study on *Child Welfare Identification and Response to the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Maine*. This research was sponsored by the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault with funding obtained through the Children's Justice Act.

I am here today to share findings from that study to inform your consideration of LD 1092, which would fund several of its key recommendations including:

- **Increase** training and specialized positions at the Department of Health and Human Services (the Department).
- **Strengthen** use of children's advocacy centers statewide.
- **Promote** additional improvements to the multidisciplinary response, including anti-trafficking resources in the community.

For context, it was federal legislation in 2014 that required state child welfare agencies to develop and implement strategies to identify, respond to, and report on sex trafficking and commercial exploitation. Under this federal law, states have the flexibility to develop policy, tools, and procedures that best meet their needs. Maine's leaders at the Department partnered early on with the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault to develop Maine's response and those initial measures were implemented by 2016.

Fast forward to 2019, MECASA contracted with our research team to evaluate Maine's response and make recommendations for systems improvement. Our team applied a mixed methods approach and included:

- Analysis of de-identified data from the Department's child welfare database.
- Surveying Maine's current child welfare staff, from intake to assessment workers to supervisors.
- Interviewing key staff at all seven of the state's children's advocacy centers.
- Assembling a multidisciplinary focus group, including an assessment worker and a supervisor from the Department, detective, prosecutor, juvenile community corrections officer, advocate, and others to gather their perspectives.

I do want to include a note about prevalence data in Maine and nationally. Trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation have been a growing concern and yet determining reliable prevalence data continues to be a challenge. These crimes are typically under-reported, and some children may not even consider themselves the "victim" of a crime. Youth experiencing a range of adverse childhood experiences and youth from marginalized populations are most at risk. National research has also demonstrated a clear connection between trafficking and children already involved in child welfare systems, juvenile justice systems, as well as teen runaways and homeless youth.

We learned a lot, and many of our recommendations were implemented immediately by the Department. There were some additional findings and recommendations that are very relevant to LD 1092.

- Identification of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children in Maine is underreported and there is a need for specialized case assessment.
- The Department had implemented training, however, because these types of cases are so complicated, there is a need for routine training and designated specialists to consult on case management, policies, and procedures.
- Resources for youth experiencing these crimes are limited and difficult to navigate. There is a tremendous need for a range of services for youth and families to provide support, and to prevent further victimization.

I will conclude with a bright spot in the research and that was the role of children's advocacy centers in Maine.

- It was clear that the children's advocacy center-led systems response is the preferred method, ideally when there is a dedicated commercial sexual exploitation coordinator, although that was not available statewide. This formalized approach brings the multidisciplinary intervention, resources, and follow-up procedures to the family and determines a response matched to the specialized needs of each individual.

I could go on and on, but in conclusion, we found that systems in Maine have some real strengths, and there are some areas in need of attention due to the complexity of this issue. LD 1092 is an opportunity to focus on this important issue and bring resources and hope to some of our state's most vulnerable and often overlooked youth.

Thank you.