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### *Testimony of Rep. Michele Meyer presenting*

## **LD 1229, An Act to Support Peer Mentors for Parents Involved in the Child Protective Services System**

### *Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee for Health and Human Services, I am Rep Michele Meyer, serving Southern Maine's District 150, Eliot and parts of Kittery and South Berwick. I am pleased to introduce **LD 1229, An Act to Support Peer Mentors for Parents Involved in the Child Protective Services System**.

Families in Maine are experiencing significant stressors that make it challenging to provide safe, stable, and nurturing environments for their children. For more than a decade, reduced state investments in the behavioral health system, including critical mental health and substance use disorder services, have weakened the infrastructure essential to supporting parents struggling with these issues. The opioid epidemic, meanwhile, increased the need for these supports and services. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many economic and health challenges families were already facing.

Over the course of the last five years, our collective efforts to respond to concerns about child safety have largely focused on improvements to the state child protective agency. More recently, attention and focus in our state have been given to considering efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect by supporting and strengthening families. Children live in families, and they do best when they are not separated from them. Recognizing this, our efforts must include ensuring parents have access to the care and support they need, when they need it, so they can address challenges and work to provide safety and stability for their children.

We understand many of the underlying risk factors for child maltreatment in our state. Almost half (47%) of Maine families assessed by child protective services in 2020 were single parent households experiencing economic stressors.<sup>i</sup> While abuse represents a serious risk for children, it's important to note that most reports of maltreatment in Maine are neglect, exacerbated by parental challenges like unmet mental health needs, untreated substance use disorder, and domestic violence.<sup>ii</sup> Often there are

multiple challenges families are trying to manage, leaving them overburdened and less able to provide safe and healthy home environments.

We also understand many of the protective factors that work to provide a buffer to these stressors.<sup>iii</sup> These include economic security, having basic needs met like food, housing, health care, and education, and the presence of strong social supports - having people to call when families need help. Many parents experience challenges in providing care for their children and could benefit from this sort of help within their communities. Yet too many do not have the support of trusted friends and family to help them through difficult times. The pandemic created additional isolation and stressors on families, leaving parents more stressed and less supported in their communities.

Peer support is an essential way to build community support for parents. The peer role is unique because it pairs a parent with a person who shares their experience, who they feel they can trust. Peers who have prior child welfare involvement can help parents understand the child protective process, and may also serve as role models of successful reunification. Similarly, peer recovery coaches understand substance use disorders and the recovery process because of their own life experiences and can support parents in accessing treatment and recovery services. Peer and recovery specialist programs have demonstrated positive outcomes for families, such as improved treatment completion and recovery rates for parents, less time children spent in out-of-home care, and improved family reunification rates.<sup>iv</sup>

To provide essential peer support for families involved with the child welfare system, LD 1229 proposes:

1. \$170,000 a year for an online educational program that provides information, resources, and support for navigating the child welfare system, for parents and led by parents;
2. \$920,000 a year to enhance and expand peer recovery coaching to support parents with substance use disorder and an open case with child protective services.

Many families in Maine at times experience challenges to providing safe, stable, and nurturing homes for their children. In response to high rates of child maltreatment and numbers of children in foster care, our natural response has been to focus on improvements to the state child welfare agency. We must also respond by ensuring parents have the resources and support they need to address challenges they face to providing safety and stability for their children. By strengthening families, we can reduce the number of children who are removed from their homes and increase the chances parents will be able to address challenges and reunify with their children if they have been separated. In this way, we can demonstrate our care and concern for children, by investing in their parents' ability to safely care for them. With this investment in Maine families, we can ensure children have every chance to grow up with their families in safe, stable environments where they can thrive.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/2020%20CPS%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/riskprotectivefactors.html>

<sup>iv</sup> [https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/files/peer19\\_brief.pdf](https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/files/peer19_brief.pdf)