

Testimony of Melissa Hackett
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In support of LD 1229, An Act to Support Peer Mentors for Parents Involved in the Child
Protective Services System
April 21, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Melissa Hackett. I am a policy associate with the Maine Children's Alliance. I am also the coordinator for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network. I am here today in support of LD 1229.

The child welfare system, like many systems, is complex to navigate, especially so for parents experiencing this very stressful and emotional time, often without friends, family, or legal guidance. It is essential that we invest in support for parents to understand the child protective process, their role and the expectations of them, and the roles of others involved in the process. Information alone is helpful, but a person there to provide it and additional support - a person who understands this process because they share that experience - is what makes peer support in child welfare so unique and important to provide for parents.

Child Protective Services 101 (CPS 101) provides this essential support to parents. This program has provided critical information and support to many parents navigating the child welfare system, as well as many service providers working with families, who also struggle to understand the child protection process. By providing this information to parents *and* providers, we create a ripple effect of understanding and support that reaches many more families. Now is the moment to invest in expanding this important service, to increase the reach of the program to even more families and the professionals working with them.

Peer recovery coaching is well established and supported in our state. It provides peer support to individuals navigating treatment and recovery for substance use disorders. Given the increase in the number of child protection cases involving untreated parental substance use disorders in Maine (over 50%), we should work now to enhance and expand peer recovery coaching to provide support to parents navigating *both* substance use disorder and child welfare involvement. We acknowledge and appreciate the initiative announced in the Governor's state of the budget address, and intend for this legislation to build off that work to design and implement a program statewide. We believe it is essential that the recovery community and parents with child welfare experience be co-leaders in the design of this program.

It is worth noting that peer support has been a recommendation for improvement to Maine's child welfare system, both in the Casey Family Programs 2021 Reportⁱ and in the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel's annual report in 2021.ⁱⁱ Peer recovery coaching has also been cited as a key strategy in Maine's opioid response.ⁱⁱⁱ

Children live in families. If we want to show them we care about their safety and wellbeing, we need to invest in their parents' ability to provide safe and nurturing care for them. That means

making sure parents have the help they need, when they need it. As a state, we have made significant investments in the child protective system, and in supporting resource parents to raise children we have deemed unsafe with their parents. We should be equally invested in giving parents every opportunity to have the resources and support they need to address challenges so they can raise their own children.

This bill represents an opportunity to do just that, by investing in peer supports for parents involved in the child welfare system. It is not an insignificant amount of money – but it is hard to put a price tag on what it means for the health and wellbeing of our children, families, and communities, to have more children able to grow up with their parents in safe and nurturing homes. I hope you will join me in supporting this legislation.

Thank you.

ⁱ “It is recommended that OCFS explore ways to support engagement between parents and the child welfare system, such as parent partner/parent mentor programs.” – Casey Family Programs Report and Recommendations, 2021

ⁱⁱ “OCFS should re-establish peer services that provide direct support to parents involved with child welfare and make them available to families across the state by October 1, 2023. These services should be informed by standards that include but are not limited to national evidence-based practices and institutional learning from the state’s long-term pilot program.” – Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel Annual Report, 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Strategy 30: Increase the availability of peer recovery coaching services - Maine Opioid Response: 2021 Strategic Action Plan