

Testimony of Jamie Brooks
In favor of LD 1229,
“An Act to Support Peer Mentors for Parents Involved in the Child Protective System”
To The Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Friday, April 21, 2023

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Jamie Brooks, and I'm speaking today in favor of LD 1229.

I am a parent with lived experience in child welfare; many years ago, I had a child protection case, and my children were in foster care. I am one of many parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system in Maine and reunified our families. We hear a lot on the news and in policy discussions about parents who are the most dangerous to their children. What often isn't heard is about the other 50 percent of parents who have a crisis point in their life and CPS intervenes. They are able to make the changes needed, and go on to live their lives and raise their children.

In my case, I was able to break the cycles that have existed in my family for generations. I was able to learn a different way to live and developed a safe support system that included my son's foster parents. I never became reinvolved. That's what parents can do when they have the right support and are engaged.

After my family reunified, I went on to provide peer support for other parents as a Parent Partner in Maine's former program for ten years. I am currently a Parent Facilitator for CPS 101 and am also a Family Consultant for the Capacity Building Center for States. The Center for States is an initiative of the Federal Children's Bureau aimed at helping child welfare agencies and professionals build the capacity to strengthen effective child welfare practice and achieve better outcomes. Since peer support for parents is a national best practice standard in child welfare, the Center provides technical assistance to jurisdictions in building these programs. I am one of the Family Consultants who works on these projects.

As a peer support provider here in Maine, I have been able to support other parents in their child protection cases as they break their own generational cycles. There is so much that parents don't know or understand about how the system works, or what's expected of them. Providing this basic information and support can make a huge difference in how parents experience their child welfare case. Peer support also changes the people who are providing support. Serving in these positions creates a sense of self-worth and an opportunity to give back.

Peer support providers also partner with the systems that work with families. Just as one person can break a generational cycle, every single child protection worker touches so many people. I have worked alongside caseworkers who were trying their best to engage with parents but didn't understand what families needed from them. The caseworkers and supervisors who had strong relationships with the Parent Partners changed the way they worked with families and improved their ability to engage parents in their cases. When they worked with parents who were reluctant to engage, they called us for help.

CPS 101 is a new initiative that was started just as the Parent Partner program was ending. It is currently the only peer support program in the state for parents navigating the child welfare system. This project uses very few resources - Parent Facilitators are only funded for a few hours a week - but we have served 70 parents and 660 providers across the state. The current mechanism for funding this program will end in September 2023; without this bill, there will be no funding for this program, and no peer support for parents navigating the complex child welfare system in Maine.

In my experience, peer support for parents in the child welfare system is a powerful tool. It provides parents with critical information and the support of another person who understands their experience, as they work through the issues that led to their child protection case.

If we want better outcomes for children and families, we need to invest in parents having support at this critical time, to help them make the changes that could impact their family for generations. This bill is an opportunity to do that, and I hope you will join me in supporting it.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

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