

Senator Baldacci and Representative Roeder, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee; my name is Jessica Harris and I live in Bangor, Maine. I have been in and out of foster care since I was 2 years old and bounced around to over 30 homes before aging out of care and was fortunate enough to get a car in time for college. I graduated from the University of Maine Orono when I was 25 years old with a bachelor's in social work and now actively work in my field. I have also been a member of Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team for over 12 years. The Youth leadership Advisory Team is a community of current and former foster youth who strive to pave a way of success for the children of Maine in public advocacy, and a community of support.

I am here in support of LD 1712: An Act Regarding Driver's Licenses for Individuals in Foster Care. When it comes to alumni of Maine's foster care system with a driver's license, I am considered a rare bird. Out of all the young people I know and call friends and family I can only count on one hand the number of alumni who have achieved a driver's license, and fewer still for a vehicle. I can say with 100% certainty, if I had not been so lucky, I would not be before you today and a college graduate with a budding career. I put all my success into having a vehicle and having the fortunate connections of others to have made it this far. I got my drivers license through the support of a staff member breaking rules of their organizations to stand here now. Something I know now as a social worker could have cost them everything. I still think of these incredible people and the risks they made so I could drive to college like so many other fortunate youths who had the family connections I craved so dearly back then.

My car was and still is my biggest lifeline. At one point in my college career, I had made a plan to live in my car while still working 25 hours a week and attending college full-time so I wouldn't lose my higher education. Many of my student loans went to pay for my car insurance, food, and gas. All the jobs I took to build experience in my field all required a car. Even jobs as simple as making burgers at the Bangor Airport required a car. Many businesses wont even interview you if you don't have a license. If I had not had this foundational piece in my success, all would have been impossible to achieve. Many young people are not so lucky as I.

I am tired of being a rare example of success for young people in foster care. I want all the young people behind me to have an earlier time succeeding to be where I stand now. Having a driver's license was my golden ticket to success at 19 years old. Many of my friends of care, who are almost in their 30's to this day do not have a drivers license and struggle needlessly all because they didn't have others to teach and support them in this critical form of education. Many of the pains they fight daily could be alleviated if only someone had given them the support a parent gives their child in obtaining a license.

Imagine the number of hard-working Mainers in our state who can't give their 100% because of a driver's license. All the success that our state could be reaping if we, as a community, supported a path to success. Having a driver's license was the most precious thing I could have ever been given in my younger years. I look at it as a badge of honor, not because I am allowed to drive, but because a driver's license means so much more. It means opportunity, it means resilience, it means freedom, and most importantly, it means a bright future. Please support LD 1712 and the bright future of these young people, Maine's children, who deserve a chance.