



# **BEHAVIORAL HEALTH COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE**

*Working together to promote quality lives*

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and good members of the Education Committee

My name is Charlotte Warren, and I am here on behalf of the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative speaking in strong favor of LD 2002.

BHCC is a collaborative of eight, non-profit, community behavioral health organizations, providing services statewide. Our programs serve approximately 70 percent of the people who receive mental health services in Maine and we serve both children and adults.

You already know that Maine is experiencing a mental health crisis: open any paper, talk to any teacher or parent. Between the shootings in Lewiston, the COVID Epidemic, and the meteoric rise in teen suicide you are aware that the need is great. A recent Kaiser report found that only 22% of the mental health needs in Maine are being met. And this starts with young people in our schools. In the most recent Maine CDC student survey, it is reported that over 1/3 of both middle and high school students reported mental health issues.

At the same time, access to mental health services is very difficult. There is a severe shortage of clinicians and behavioral health workers and the waiting list for outpatient therapy is a minimum of 4 months

The collaboration of mental health providers who provide high level clinical services with our schools is a critical one. Clinicians can meet the students where they are, eliminating difficult scheduling issues for parents and students, they are paying singular attention to the mental health needs of all students, and build trust by being seen regularly and being involved in all aspects of a student's schooling. A clinician is different than a guidance counselor and has tools and training to deal with issues beyond those of normal child development.

But, this essential tool is still a scarce service, due in large part to the fact that the way schools contract and the ways the mental health organizations are reimbursed is outdated and does not adequately compensate the clinical worker or the agency that supervises and supports them. The state has whittled down what it will pay for to such a degree that the counselor cannot afford to be involved in supporting and treating the “whole student”, even though research indicates that’s best practice. If the state can help maintain these professional people, they will absolutely not only our young people, but also our schools who struggle to meet the needs of these young people, and struggle to find adequately trained clinicians to serve.

Let me say one quick thing about “contracting out” these positions instead of hiring “in house”. When these services are provided through an agency, the mental health clinician has a network of support and supervision of other behavioral health professionals. This support is different from the support of school personnel, which while critical, is not the same. We are seeing this as police departments across the state and country try to address mental health needs by placing one social worker in the law enforcement office environment. Those folks are reporting not having adequate support and back up resources from mental health professionals to be able to do their job well and over the long term. This is just one advantage of schools working through mental health agencies, They are also more aware of and connected to any additional mental health services that may be required.

Mentally healthy and supported youth become mentally healthy adults. This is not a place Maine should “skimp” on as early intervention and prevention is the absolute best thing we can do to protect our young people and ensure their healthy futures. Please vote for this bill to make a small investment with a big payoff in considering the future of our young people.

Thank you and I’m happy to answer any questions.