

Testimony of Melissa Hackett  
Coordinator, Maine Child Welfare Action Network  
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Health and Human Services Committee

LD 779: An Act to Create a Separate Department of Child and Family Services

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 (MCA). We serve as the backbone, and I serve as the coordinator, for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network (the Network). I am here today to testify neither for nor against this legislation, on behalf of both entities.

Overall, both MCA and the Network support the idea of considering the optimal structure for the delivery of services for children, youth, and families. We have made recommendations in recent years suggesting as much, and last session, supported legislation to create a commission to study this topic, specifically around the Department of Health and Human Services. Other states have done intentional work to restructure services to improve outcomes for children and families, like Washington state, which has been recently lifted up in the Government Oversight Committee as a potential model.

That said, we have concerns about this legislation as a vehicle to consider this. In general, our concern is that this is prescriptive restructuring, and we would suggest a more process-driven approach - something more like the commission that was supported last session by this committee and whose work is still underway. Overall, we would recommend that commission serve as the vehicle for considering this issue, and that any legislative action would come after that group reports out its findings.

A few other items of note in considering a new department for child and family services. This should include a consideration of all services, including services that may currently be housed in other Departments, like juvenile justice in Corrections and early care and education programs in Education. Additionally, a new department would separate identified programs and services from Medicaid, which gives us great concern, as it is a critical potential funding source. Above all else, any new department should seek to create better coordination that improves service delivery and outcomes for children, youth, and families.

We appreciate the attention this committee, and the Government Oversight Committee, are giving to consideration of the optimal structure for delivery of services for families. However, we have concerns about this particular bill as the best policy solution. We would strongly encourage the committee to support the work of the ongoing commission studying DHHS, and look forward to their work and future recommendations that could be acted upon in another legislative session. Thank you.