

Testimony of Huyanna Clearwater

January 31, 2024

In Support of LD 2078

An Act to Increase Participation by the Department of Health and Human Services Regarding Federal Benefits for Which Children in the Custody of the Department Are Eligible

Good morning, Senator Baldacci and Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee; my name is Huyanna Clearwater, and I live in Augusta, Maine. I attend the University of Southern Maine and I am in my first year. I am also a member of Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT), which is a group of current and former youth from Maine's foster care system. In YLAT we help each other learn new skills and advocate for change that will ultimately help in our journey, and our younger peers, to achieve our future goals.

As a young person who transitioned from Maine's foster care system, I am here today in support of LD 2078, An Act to Increase Participation by the Department of Health and Human Services Regarding Federal Benefits for Which Children in the Custody of the Department Are Eligible. I entered the foster care system at the age of five and aged out when I turned eighteen years old. While in care, at the age of twelve, I started receiving survivor's benefits when my father passed away. At the age of sixteen, it was decided that my ability to hold down a job was very minimal and my caseworker applied for disability on my behalf, granted by the Social Security Administration. I was not aware of these events or that I had survivor benefits until I was nineteen years old. My caseworker informed me that the funds from my SSI benefits had been going directly to paying for my therapy, placement at a group home, and "any other things that we (the dept) may have needed on your behalf." I didn't understand this process. I am curious why these funds went toward my therapy and placements when I also had MaineCare, which also covers these services. If I was not in foster care, my SSI would have gone directly to myself as they do to other individuals who are not in the foster care system.

The decision to apply for Social Security benefits and the belief that I could not hold down a job as an adult by my caseworker had lasting effects. It caused me to give up on myself and limit my ability to contribute to society. The short-term benefit of providing funds for my care did not outweigh the long-term implications of being identified as needing social security disability. In addition, I was limited in the amount of time I could work and earn money to support myself. I was allowed to work only a certain number of hours, despite the desire and ability to work more. I was never informed how these benefits would impact me as it relates to how many hours I work or attending college. As a 31-year-old individual I am proud to say that I advocate at the national level for Youth in Care, am currently attending college, raising a son, and work for several youth advocacy organizations.

I support the passing of this bill because no matter how good the intentions may be, there are long lasting implications which can cause harm and limit an individual's ability to lead a fulfilling life. These decisions need to be done in partnership with young people, with education about

the implications along the way. Benefits and financial supports are important and complex resources and the education and support on how to navigate them is just as important.

I want to thank you for your time and consideration and for your work supporting youth in care as they prepare for their futures outside of DHHS. I would welcome any questions.

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