

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 Meyers, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Leah Cleland and I live in Lewiston, Maine. I am here today as an alumni of Maine's foster care system and member of Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT), which is a role I truly take pride in. In both capacities, we work together with Maine's youth in care to collaborate in conversations and further steps in action towards bettering our state's Foster Care System.

I am here today representing the voices of youth, past and present, as I spent most of my life in our state's Foster Care System and aged out when I was 18.

I had no idea how benefits worked or what I could have access to when I aged out of care. I spent the first few years of adulthood, in transition, figuring it out myself with little to no guidance.

I can confidently say that the most important thing for the committee to take away from this, is that the future of our youth depends on the change in how we educate and allocate benefits for youth while in care, so they can have a chance to prepare for their futures.

Most of us change our minds numerous times, before coming to terms with a set plan after we graduate high school. Young people need the freedom to find oneself without more barriers or limitations. Young people need peace of mind, to understand benefits they have access to that will allow each individual to encourage more exploration of career pathways, not limited to college.

I'd like to leave you with this final thought, an 18-year-old is about to age out of the system, and they are facing this incredibly difficult housing crisis. The benefits they had while in care were used to cover their room and board between placements. They're now left with little resources to navigate, finding a new, permanent place to live on their own. Imagine the insecurity they'll face without a safety net. Please picture your own children at home. Would you allow them to leave home without making sure they were set up for success? We owe it to our youth to do better.

Please consider support for LD 2078. Thank you for your time and consideration as we work together to offer support for our youth leaving care to start their adult lives.

Best,

Leah Cleland

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