

Testimony of Melissa Hackett  
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Health and Human Services Committee  
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In support LD 1877, An Act to Reduce the Number of Children Living in Deep Poverty in ME

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, which serves as the backbone organization for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network, where I am the coordinator. I am testifying in both capacities today in support of this legislation.

I would like to focus my testimony today on the correlation between poverty and child maltreatment, and the opportunity this legislation presents to make a meaningful investment in preventing child abuse and neglect by strengthening the economic security of families. As you know, our Network is partnering with the state in the development and implementation of the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan, which aims to keep children safe by keeping families strong. One of the strategies of the Plan is improving the economic security of parents and caregivers to provide safety and stability for their children.

We all want children in our state to be safe and healthy and have the opportunity to grow up in stable, nurturing homes. Efforts to improve systems of support that will have the most meaningful impact on better outcomes for children, youth, and their families, should be directed by what the data and evidence show are most effective. We know that preventing child abuse and neglect is possible, and we know how to do it: invest in families by providing economic and concrete supports, including cash assistance, and support for transportation, housing, and education and employment. A broad body of decades of research<sup>1</sup> shows these things work to reduce maltreatment and the need for child protective involvement – and they are much less costly than the foster care system.

Given this, we urge legislators to support efforts like this bill that would prevent child maltreatment and family separation by ensuring families have access to the resources and services that help to prevent crisis. This includes considering how to fully utilize initiatives that address the conditions of poverty, which is a driving factor in child protective involvement. State policy solutions backed by research<sup>2</sup> urge consideration of programs like TANF, the first purpose of which is to “provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives.” In addition to

providing direct cash assistance and supports to alleviate immediate economic stressors, it provides critical support for job training and education. Research demonstrates that even a 10% increase in state benefit levels (including TANF) is associated with an 8% reduction in foster care placement.<sup>1</sup> Further, each \$1,000 states spend per person on public benefits programs is associated with reductions in child maltreatment reports (4%), substantiations (4%), foster care placements (2%), and child deaths associated with maltreatment (8%).<sup>1</sup> We must make every effort as a state to most effectively leverage this program to reduce economic stress on the most under-resourced families that, without help, can lead to the breakdown of healthy family functioning.

Excerpt from joint parent letter from the Center for Parent Leadership and Advocacy, to the Government Oversight Committee, December 13, 2023

“Some of the most important resources we received were not just formal services, but opportunities: we first needed reliable income to meet our basic needs, and then a pathway to financial independence. Poverty is often mistaken for neglect, and it takes skill to know the difference. We recommend investing in policies and programs that relieve immediate financial stress for families, while helping them build a path forward to new economic opportunities. The right support can help more parents make the changes needed to be the parents they want to be.”

Excerpt from the testimony of Jamie Brooks, to the Government Oversight Committee, December 13, 2023

“I had access to a lot of financial support, some of which is less available to families today. I got a housing voucher immediately and was able to find housing quickly. I had a counselor who helped me to work through trauma and develop more skills. She also encouraged me to go to school and finish my degree through the Parents as Scholars program, so I didn’t have to keep working in jobs where schedules were unpredictable, and the pay was low. The Parents as Scholars program helped me purchase school supplies and books and even connected me to a program that provided a vehicle for low monthly payments, and this allowed me to get to my classes and appointments. Finishing that degree was so empowering. All my children were with me when I graduated, and I still have the picture on my refrigerator and look at it every day. These economic supports gave me choices about my situation and my future that I did not have when I was living in poverty without any help. Finances are a huge part of having choices: if I could have just packed up and moved somewhere else instead of being isolated in a domestic violence shelter, my family’s story may have been very different.

People don't want to live on benefits, and I ended my voucher and other financial support as soon as I was able to stand on my own. Today, I am not reliant on any kind of public help. I am independent and educated, working, and able to take care of myself and my family. That is where everybody wants to end up, and I was one of the lucky ones to receive what I needed to get there. Everyone deserves to have these same types of opportunities to help themselves and their families."

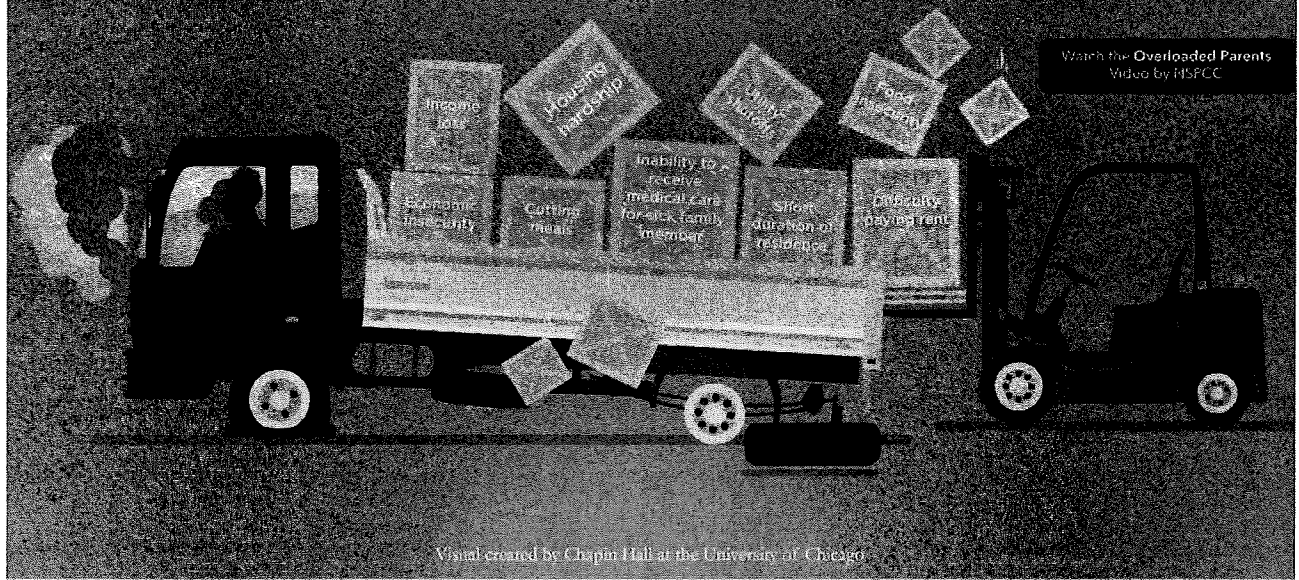
Just as we value resourcing foster families who take in children when they are unsafe in their homes, we must equally invest in resourcing parents in their capacity to raise their own children. Raising a child, whatever the caregiver's role, takes significant financial resources and supports for children and their families to have the best outcomes. Our investments in families of all types should reflect that. And this legislation provides a critical opportunity for us to demonstrate that commitment to Maine families.

Thank you.

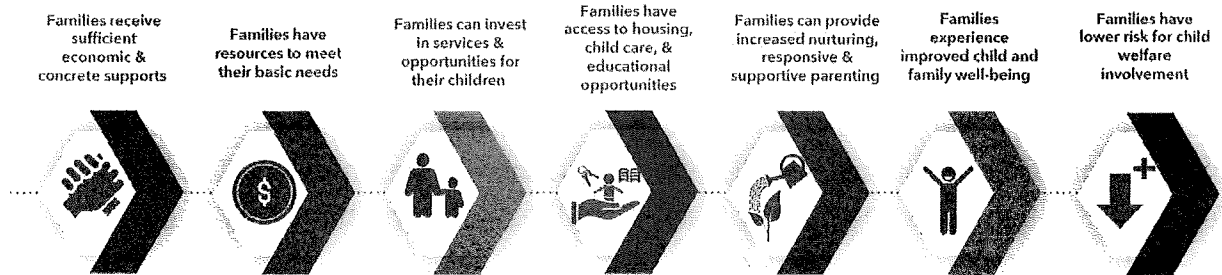
## **References**

1. Chapin Hall. Child and Family Well-being System: Economic & Concrete Supports as a Core Component. March 2023. <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Supports-deck.pdf>
2. American Public Human Services Agency and Chapin Hall. Evidence to Impact: State Policy Options to Increase Access to Economic & Concrete Supports as a Child Welfare Prevention Strategy. June 2023. [https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-ECS-Tool-with-Intro\\_6.14.23.pdf](https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-ECS-Tool-with-Intro_6.14.23.pdf).

# Multiple Material & Economic Hardships Overload Families and Increase Risk for Child Welfare Involvement



## Family Investment Model



Source: Chapin Hall