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Testimony of the Office of Child and Family Services
Maine Department of Health and Human Services

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation

In support of LD 2049, "*An Act to Increase Safety for Child Welfare Services Workers.*"

Sponsor: Representative Stover
Hearing Date: February 1, 2024

Senator Chipman, Representative Crafts, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation, my name is Bobbi Johnson, and I serve as the Director of the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) in the Department of Health and Human Services. I am here today to testify in support of LD 2049, "*An Act to Increase Safety for Child Welfare Services Workers.*"

This bill would allow state-owned vehicles used regularly for the work of protecting children to be exempt from the requirement that they display special registration plates. This bill was developed and proposed by OCFS as a measure towards addressing the safety and wellbeing of OCFS' field staff within the child welfare division.

Over the last few years, OCFS has experienced a dramatic uptick in the number of threats and acts of violence against child welfare staff, as well as an increase in the severity of these incidents. This escalation reflects trends reported by other child welfare agencies in our region and nationally. In 2022, a child welfare worker in Illinois was stabbed to death when responding to a report of possible child endangerment. This was the second death of a worker in less than five years in Illinois alone (the first fatality involved the beating to death of a worker who was responding to a report). In 2015, a worker in Vermont was gunned down outside her office by a mother involved with child welfare. A 2021 article¹ found that in Florida, within six months of beginning their employment, 75% of workers experienced non-physical violence, 37% had experienced threats, and in just those first six months 2.3% had already experienced physical violence. This data is, unfortunately, reflective of much of the experience of our field staff here in Maine.

We receive threat and incident report forms from the field on a weekly and sometimes even daily basis. Caseworkers regularly experience threats against themselves and their family members. Caseworkers have been followed, harassed (including having photos and harassing language about them posted around the towns where they work and live), threatened with physical harm, and in the most extreme cases have been harmed or narrowly avoided harm.

¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30484356/>

Currently all state vehicles (including those used by child welfare staff) are required to have specific specialty license plates that identify the vehicle as a "state car." Each district office has several vehicles assigned and used by child welfare staff on a daily basis to conduct investigations, visit children and families involved with child welfare, transport children, etc. OCFS has received feedback from the field that the specialty license plates make it easier for members of the public to identify, locate, and target child welfare staff. Given the uptick in reported treats, OCFS believes it is imperative that this bill be passed to permit staff to move about the communities in which they work without drawing significant attention that could endanger their safety.

In recent public testimony provided by members of OCFS' staff to the Government Oversight Committee, one area of concern was centered around safety. OCFS continues to work directly with law enforcement to address threats and acts of violence to ensure the safety of staff, and we believe this bill offers a relatively simple solution to increase safety for staff and serve as a preventative measure instead of only responding after a threat or act of violence has occurred.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have and to make myself available for questions at the work session.