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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting

**LD 2197 - An Act to Strengthen the Health, Well-being and Academic Success
of Children and Their Families Through Increased Community Support of
the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 118 on the peninsula of Portland, and I serve as Speaker of the House. Thank you for the time this afternoon to present **LD 2197, An Act to Strengthen the Health, Well-being and Academic Success of Children and Their Families Through Increased Community Support of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine.**

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued a warning on the prevalence of loneliness and the dangers a lack of social connection presents to our collective health and well-being. This threat, the resulting outcomes of which are comparable to the risks associated with heavy smoking, is especially concerning for our young people, as time spent in-person with friends has declined 70 percent between 2003 and 2020, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ A critical response to this loneliness epidemic includes community programs and resources that bring young people together to facilitate purpose and connection.

With a mission “to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens,” the Boys and Girls Club, which has several clubs in Maine answers the call by creating safe, inclusive places for young people to socialize, learn, and explore their futures through access to mentors, meaningful after-school programming, career exploration opportunities, and other resources vital to young people.

In service to the young people in my community and the many surrounding communities, the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine is embarking on the development of a new Bridge to Success Center with a goal to break ground in 2025. The 16,000 square foot facility will offer dedicated spaces for junior high and high school age youth to turn interests into career pathways and ambitions into real opportunities to pursue higher education, trade skills, and tech credentials.

¹ The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Staff from the organization and community members to follow will share more about the depth of programming that will be available through the new space, but I will briefly share with excitement that the new facility will offer:

- Career exploration labs where teens can experience VR technology training and practical hands on experience in trade skills,
- a large kitchen to prepare daily meals and offer training in culinary arts and hospitality,
- a tech and gaming center teaching coding skills, VR, and STEM learning,
- hosting space to collaborate with local partners such as the community colleges, and
- program space for traditional programs in arts, academics, and more.

These offerings align with the recommendations of the legislative Task Force to Study the Creation of a Comprehensive Career and Technical Education System. The report, which was published this January, recommends expanding CTE opportunities, traditionally focused on high school juniors and seniors, to more students beginning in their middle school years. The task force also noted a lack of space for CTE and supported efforts to expand existing capacity.²

On behalf of the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine, I am asking this committee and Legislature to be a partner in this project that will help shape future opportunities for more than 250 junior high and high school age youth each day, and more than 500 each year, while serving as a cutting-edge model for communities around the state. This \$15 million dollar project, for which the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine has already invested \$4 million of their own funds and raised an additional \$4.5 million to date, deserves our support. The bill before you would dedicate \$2 million of state resources toward this goal.

These resources would serve disadvantaged youth most in need of our support and for whom our support would have the greatest positive impact. The youth served by Boys and Girls Club programming are more likely than other young people to face economic hardships, as 70 percent live below the poverty line and 80 percent qualify for free lunch.

Navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood is universally challenging, and for young people facing issues like food insecurity, homelessness, racial injustice, or the complexities of adapting to a new country, these challenges can feel insurmountable. The Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine has a unique model for supporting this transition, an essential component of which is career exploration, and it is a model that can serve as an effective pilot for other after school resources throughout Maine.

I am grateful for your attention to this bill and urge your partnership in supporting this incredible community institution. I welcome your questions about this exciting opportunity.

² Task Force to Study the Creation of a Comprehensive Career and Technical Education System. State of Maine 131st Legislature, First Regular and First Special Sessions. January 2024. <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10600>