

Brianna DiDonato-Duran

Regarding LD 2197

February 20, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Brianna DiDonato-Duran of Gorham and I am the current president of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southern Maine Alumni Association. I am testifying with my strong support of LD 2197 for the *Bridge to Success Center* for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southern Maine and how it will greatly improve the lives of youth in the area.

My experience with the Boys & Girls Clubs began when I turned seven-years-old. Throughout my childhood at “The Club” I participated in many programs and activities including photography, arts and crafts, kickball, floor hockey, billiards, and Dr. Robert Ballard’s Immersion Science program, to name a few. I also took on leadership roles within the Torch Club and Keystone Club programs which are designed to teach community, fitness, recreation, and leadership skills to members. During this time, I learned about service to the community by hosting bake sales to send the proceeds to victims of Hurricane Katrina and also sending holiday baskets to soldiers overseas.

Most importantly, I learned how to swim at The Club, which has been one of the greatest life skills for me. This resulted in my first job as a locker room attendant and led to training to be a lifeguard in the same pool. As a result of lifeguarding and teaching swim lessons through the Michael Phelps Foundation, I was able to identify my true passion for teaching. I also learned endless compassion, empathy, patience, and persistence, further causing me to pursue teaching special education with a focus on individuals with emotional and behavioral needs.

I continued my education after high school with help from the USM scholarship through “The Club” to pursue my studies in the field of education as the first of my immediate family to attend college. I later became the first of my family to receive a Master’s degree in 2013. I have had the pleasure of witnessing the expansion of the USM scholarship into the Promise Scholar program to support more students to have the ability to obtain degrees, with and graduate debt-free. My ability to graduate debt-free has led me to further pursue various degrees within the educational field, including behavior analysis and school psychology because I feel that I have so much more I can give back to future youth to live highly fulfilling lives.

With my current role, I teach middle and high students diagnosed with level II and III with Autism Spectrum Disorder at a special purpose private school in a non-profit organization. In my program, I focus on teaching functional life skills to allow my students to live the most successful and independent lives possible.

To conclude, the *Bridge to Success Center* will allow members to experience mentoring, programming, and training opportunities in career readiness and technological education. This will allow training for members who benefit more from real-life application and hands-on learning to obtain real life skills, while also allowing these children to recognize their potential and plan for futures they may not even know are possible. I would like to thank you for your time and your consideration.