

Testimony of Melissa Hackett

Coordinator, Maine Child Welfare Action Network

Neither for nor against, LD 2214, An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

February 26, 2024

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. My name is Melissa Hackett. I am a policy associate with the Maine Children's Alliance, which serves as the backbone for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network. I am offering information on behalf of the Network, for the committee's consideration of LD 2214, particularly to appropriations for the Department of Health and Human Services.

Our Network is comprised of organizations and individuals committed to working with state and community partners and families, to ensure the safety and well-being of all children and youth in Maine. We strongly support the proposed investments to improve child safety through allocations to the Office of Child and Family Services. Our state child protective agency has been under intense scrutiny recently, given high rates of child maltreatment and several high-profile child deaths. Through this public process, we have heard from frontline staff, community partners, and families, that investments to improve child protective practice and reduce workload are critical. The investments reflected in this budget proposal respond to the urgent need to strengthen the child protective workforce. We encourage you to support these as a concrete opportunity to improve the safety of children in our state.

Despite these positive investments, there are several provisions that reflect cuts to services that support child safety and family well-being. Members of this committee who are also members of the Government Oversight Committee will bear with me as I share what I have often shared during their review of child protective services. We must care much better and sooner about the conditions that children in our state live in. It is critical to healthy development and future success that children grow up in nurturing environments where their basic needs are met and they experience safety and stability. This means ensuring their parents and caregivers (who are often grandparents) have what they need to provide for the health and safety of children in their care.

A significant body of evidence tells us that economic and concrete supports to families are essential to prevent child abuse and neglect, the need for the crisis intervention of child protective services, and the potential for family separation and foster care. These downstream government interventions are much more costly – financially, and in the trauma sustained by children, families, and our communities. Ensuring families can meet their basic needs and care

for their own children represents a cost-effective and proactive means of ensuring children have the health, safety, and stability necessary for them to reach their full potential.

Given this, the Network urges the committee to reject proposed cuts to child care, food and housing assistance through SNAP and General Assistance, and the MaineCare Savings Program. The Legislature has made critical investments to improve essential economic and concrete supports to families that offer them safety and stability – now is not the time to pull back from those commitments to Maine families.

Further, we urge the committee to reject the proposed additional savings of \$107 million for potential future costs. Instead, we urge the committee to consider how this money could be better spent now to alleviate the significant hardship children and families are experiencing. This is good for Maine children, their families, and the success of our state as a whole.

Thank you.