



February 14, 2025

Good morning Senators Rotundo & Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine & Meyer, and esteemed members of the Appropriations & Financial Affairs and the Health & Human Services Committees.

My name is Joe Everett and I serve as the president & CEO at The Opportunity Alliance and am here today representing the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative. I come before you today with a deep concern for the well-being of children, individuals, and families across Maine. We are navigating unprecedented and increasingly difficult times, where too many people are struggling and suffering. Maine is facing a growing set of challenges that are impacting people and communities across the state.

One of the most pressing concerns is the housing crisis, where skyrocketing costs and a shortage of affordable units have left many struggling to find stable and secure places to live. Homelessness is on the rise, with shelters at or beyond capacity and few long-term solutions available to help people transition into permanent housing. For families, finding quality, affordable childcare is another significant challenge, making it difficult for parents to remain in the workforce and support their households.

At the same time, Maine is experiencing critical workforce shortages, particularly in industries essential to daily life, such as healthcare and childcare. The demand for skilled workers far exceeds supply, leading to service disruptions, longer wait times, and added stress on existing staff. These shortages are particularly concerning in the behavioral health sector, where nearly every service has a waitlist, preventing individuals from getting timely access to care. Additionally, a lack of psychiatric providers is limiting access to vital medication management services, further compounding the crisis.

Maine's child welfare system is also under strain as they, too, are struggling with staff recruitment. Similarly, a cumbersome referral process has left mental health residential beds (PNMI – Private Non-Medical Institutions) unfilled, despite a high demand for these services. Hospital emergency departments (EDs) are increasingly overcrowded, as many Mainers turn to EDs for care that could be better managed through preventative and community-based services.

While progress has been made in reducing overdose deaths, the opioid crisis remains a serious public health concern, requiring sustained efforts in prevention, treatment, and recovery support. At the same time, poverty is on the rise, with more families struggling to afford food, housing, and healthcare as the cost of living continues to climb.

These challenges are at the heart of daily discussions at my organization and throughout the sector. Like you folks, we are deeply concerned about the well-being of the children, individuals, and families that we serve. We know that these challenges are interconnected, and addressing them requires a strategic, coordinated response from state government, policymakers, people with lived experience, community leaders, service providers, and businesses.

We are not here today to place blame. We want to acknowledge and commend the work of the Department. We have great working relationships with staff at DHHS, and we appreciate their support and investments in programs that serve our communities. Likewise, we thank you, the Legislature, for your continued commitment to strengthening our system of care. Your investments matter, and they make a tangible difference in the lives of Maine's most vulnerable people. We know that your work is extremely difficult.

Continuing to invest in essential services, rather than imposing funding cuts, is critical to ensuring the well-being and safety of Mainers. Right now, too many individuals and families are struggling, and any reductions to behavioral health and human service programs will only deepen their hardship. The choices made in this budget will have real consequences – either we strengthen the safety net that so many rely on or allow gaps to widen, leaving our most vulnerable without the support they need.

This is a critical moment for leadership and commitment. Maine's future depends on the investments we make today. We will be presenting a package of bills to the HHS Committee that will strengthen behavioral health services, and we look forward to collaborating with you to advance these initiatives. We urge you to prioritize the well-being of our communities by safeguarding and expanding the essential services that keep children safe, families stable, and support individuals on the path to recovery and self-sufficiency.

We appreciate all that you do for those we serve, and we stand ready to work alongside you to find solutions that move Maine forward. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I welcome any questions.

Submitted by:
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The Opportunity Alliance
On behalf of the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative