

***In- Support
LD 210 Budget
Children's Mental Health***

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of both the Appropriations & Financial Affairs and Health & Human Services Committees,

I'm Jayne Van Bramer, Sweetser's President and CEO. Sweetser is part of a coalition of partners including the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative and the Maine Alliance for Addiction and Mental Health Services. I'm speaking in favor of the budget and requesting strong consideration on a few areas to enhance your impact to address the youth mental health crisis we are currently experiencing.

CHILD ACT

First, I'd like to thank you. In the last budget cycle, you provided essential leadership in addressing the plight of children and families in accessing behavioral health services and the workforce crisis facing our field. You provided resources specifically designed as workforce incentives to attract, train, and retain individuals to properly staff and establish the state's only Child ACT team, which stands for Assertive Community Treatment.

As you know, the Department of Justice specifically cited Sweetser's sole Child ACT team as a benefit to our state. Previously, it was cited as a gap in services that hindered children and families from having access to lifesaving community-based care.

This model is a best practice. The program supports children who have not benefited from lower levels of treatment and who are at risk of needing inpatient, crisis, or residential services. The goal of Child ACT is to work with the child and family to identify goals and implement strategies that will improve the child's functioning while remaining at home in the community, with available support 24/7. Institutional care should only be used as a last resort as studies have shown it can have a detrimental effect on a child's well-being and development. Keeping children at home with necessary supports should be at the forefront of all our responsibilities.

Sweetser is proud to operate the state's only Child ACT team.

As both of your committees think about how best to maximize Maine's limited budget resources, I would urge you to consider how you can expand the footprint of this program as both a means to increase access in underserved communities and assist in addressing our collective workforce challenges.

You will have a proposal before you in the coming weeks that seeks to build on the success you created to incentivize the creation of two additional Child ACT teams in Lewiston and Bangor. You simply cannot have services without staff. Not only were we able to hire staff and clinicians because of these workforce incentives, but they stuck around. The attrition rate in behavioral health is around 30%. These incentives ensured staff stayed with the program and were compensated for the valuable work they do every day.

COLAS

With uncertainty from Washington, it's even more important for the state to ensure nonprofit providers like Sweetser are left whole. Cost-of-living adjustments are essential in just keeping programs that serve your constituents afloat. Our margins are very narrow, In fact, in many cases, programs continue to operate at a loss even with a must-have adjustment factored in. Sweetser estimates that without the COLA, we are poised to have a \$600,000 annualized negative impact to our budget. That directly impacts our collective ability to treat the mental health and substance use needs of Mainers in every corner of our state, in your districts, having served over 12,000 Mainers last year alone. Please ensure COLA is included and funded for Maine's behavioral health system.

Thank you for your time, for the monumental task ahead of you this session, and as always I am here for both committees as a resource if and when needed.

Sincerely,

Jayne Van Bramer
President & CEO