



February 24, 2025

Good morning, Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine and Meyer, and members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Rachel Bousquet. I am the Executive Director for KidsPeace New England Programs for Children Services, which provides inpatient and outpatient programs for children of Maine. I am here today to speak to you regarding the proposed biennial budget.

Nothing I find more important than speaking to you today concerning one very important key to the success of Maine and its future. Our children. I am going to speak to you about my passion and I am hoping you will make it yours. Regardless of what side of the aisle you are on or who you sit beside, I urge you all to prioritize the well-being of Maine's children.

I have lived in Maine all my life, and I pride myself on the community in which I was brought up -- Northern Maine. I was once a child whose mother needed benefits from the state despite working two jobs and caring for two children. I saw firsthand the cracks and blind spots in our system. As difficult as it was at times, I was taken under the wing of many people in my community. Now, I am living and raising a family in Maine with children of my own who came through the system of care until reaching adoption. I know the system, I know Maine, and quite frankly, I am not sure why I am here today to state the obvious. Do we really understand the state of children's services in Maine? At least half of all children in Maine receive MaineCare. We cannot afford to limit funding in MaineCare that helps provide access to critical services and care for children across the state. You may be feeling at this time, you are maybe in for a lecture, but that is not my intention.

I come to you with a plea for children in Maine.

We have over 2,400 children in state custody in Maine today, spanning across the state. Children are experiencing prolonged stays in emergency departments and hospitals. Children are being sent out of state, to Long Creek, or are stuck in hotel rooms staffed by caseworkers because there is a lack of foster families to provide care and not enough capacity for services in the community, with waitlists reaching months, if not years. Law enforcement and ambulatory services across the state, and particularly in rural areas, are overtaxed, parents are at a loss, not knowing where to turn to advocate for their child and access care, and worst of all, too many children never get the chance to access the services they need in a system that is failing them—only adding to their needs and trauma in the long run. **I see this every day.** We cannot go back in time, but we can take accountability at the moment, and we must do better for our children and quickly.



If you walk away with nothing else today, I want to leave you with some key data that show the situation we are in...

- Since 2007, 70 programs have closed. There are just 19 left open today-- most in the southern part of Maine.
- 178 current licensed residential beds today and are dwindling. We will likely see two more facilities closing their residential beds later this year.
- Of those 178 beds, only 20-21 can serve children with IDD/DD diagnosis.
- 126 children are being served in Maine residential beds
- 70 children from Maine that are placed out of state today
- 80 children are awaiting residential placement, and half of those children have been approved for out-of-state

With this in mind, we must ask ourselves...

- Why are we as a state continuing to send our money elsewhere to invest in other state's child welfare systems and not our own?
- Why do we send our children away from their home state, families, and communities to receive treatment? How is this therapeutic? What are the long-term impacts of this displacement?
- How did our reimbursement model established to serve children become so broken?

Children in Maine do not need sympathy; they need us to step in. The scars of a broken system never disappear. So much damage and trauma is already done, but we still have time to rewrite the future for every child who still hopes for safety, love, and a place to call home. Thank you all so much for your time today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,

Rachel Bousquet

Executive Director, KidsPeace New England