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Testimony of Representative Michele Meyer presenting

**LD 518, Resolve, Increasing Access to Maternal and Child Health
Care**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

As a mother, a grandmother, and as the House Chair of the Health and Human Services Committee in the Maine Legislature, the issue of child and family well-being is near and dear to me. I am glad to bring forward LD 518 for this committee's consideration, as a means of strengthening support for new parents and their children.

Research and evidence provide a strong foundation for how we support the safety and stability of children and their families. This includes economic and concrete supports in times of need, access to supportive services, and communities where families know who and where they can go to when they are experiencing challenges. I am proud of my ongoing support for Maine's statewide Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan, which articulates this framework for keeping children safe by keeping families strong.

Parenting is hard, and that's true for everyone, especially at the start, when everything is new and overwhelming. Yet there is still so much stigma and fear associated with parents reaching out for help. We can encourage help seeking by promoting and building the capacity of community-based supports and services to provide it, in familiar and comfortable settings. When services are universal, they also reduce stigma that families may feel in accessing them "because they need it."

Home visiting provides support for new parents in a home- or community-based setting. This is an essential program that supports new parents during a critical time of transition for themselves and their child, from understanding child development to connecting to resources to meet basic

needs. Home visitors and families develop strong relationships and trust, and they meet regularly to address families' needs. Their support includes:

- Support for healthy pregnancy habits
- Advice on things like breastfeeding, making sure babies sleep safely, avoiding accidents with children, and eating well
- Showing parents how to be positive and supportive with their children by reading, playing, and praising good behavior
- Encouraging talking to babies and teaching them things from a young age
- Working with parents to plan for the future, continue their education, and find work and child care
- Connecting families to other services and resources in their community

Every new parent should have access to this kind of resource – a person who is there to walk alongside them and support them as they navigate their new role as a parent.

In Maine, the evidence-based home visiting model utilized is Parents as Teachers, through Maine Families, supported by the Maine Children's Trust. The referral pathway for home visiting is CradleME, a free service that connects parents with the right home-based or virtual support for them and their baby. It is a partnership between many programs created to help new parents and children, including Public Health Nursing, Early Intervention for ME, Women Infants and Children, Maine MOM, Help ME Grow, and Plans of Safe Care. It also includes linkages to Access Maine and 211.

To ensure every parent has access to – and feels comfortable engaging with – these kinds of supports and services, it is critical that we consider how these services are promoted, referred, and taken up by families, so we can maximize this program to serve as many families as possible. This was also a recommendation made recently by the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel, recognizing the important role of support for new families to prevent child abuse and neglect. This bill provides a mechanism to bring the various partners supporting new parents together to develop a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities to increase promotion, referral, and receipt of services for new parents.

At a time in Maine where there has been much attention to the state's child welfare agency and concerns about child protection, we must build out earlier support for families. By bolstering the capacity of community-based supports like home visiting, we can better and sooner help parents and reduce the need for an intrusive state agency intervention in their lives. This makes families stronger, and children safer.