

## Testimony for LD 802, DHHS Hearing on 3/27/2025

My name is Stefanie Millette and I am a Maine Resident and Grants Manager for a large Maine Foundation. Outside of the office, I have 19 years of experience supporting families impacted by the foster care system including as a Court Appointed Special Advocate. Those 19 years started when as a college student, I signed up to mentor 3 brothers in foster care, and took them to sports games, college visits, restaurants, and more.

Mentoring made me curious about the foster care system. I went on to serve in many different foster programs in Maine and Massachusetts and made a general observation. In both states, caseworkers, placements and schools were subject to unexpected changes and this meant those three contexts were unable to provide stable and consistent adults. In Massachusetts, mentorship programs for youth in foster care helped address this gap. There was no mentor program in Maine.

So I decided I'd bring mentorship into my home. I purchased a condo that would meet all Maine foster home licensing conditions, and told my DHHS orientation instructors, licensing worker, and our D2 placement coordinator that I had a weekend every month or two to spare and that I wanted to provide a young person with consistent Big Brother Big Sister type retreats. I was matched quickly with a female teenager. I provided meals, clean bedroom and shower, but other than sleeping we spent most of our weekends out in the community practicing how to plan a daytrip to Boston, or taking a class at a gym, or scribbling real talk budgets on menus.

I knew we were on to something when my mentee asked her caseworker to match me with her estranged teenage brother – who on alternating months with his sister, became my second mentee.

There were flaws in my approach to simply deeming myself a mentor, without there being a formal mentor model at DHHS. In the DHHS system, I was just a licensed foster home. So if I recounted goals my mentee was working on or offered to help apply for career and academic opportunities, I got a brief,

“thanks for sharing! And have you thought any more about being their permanent foster or adoptive parent?” It was a message of all or nothing familiar to many professionals who want to help youth in care, but don’t see an opportunity.

This bill will, in partnership with caseworkers and young adults, create space in the DHHS ecosystem for exactly these opportunities – structured enough to be incorporated into good case management, but broad enough to invite a variety of professionals to share expertise and build genuine connections with mentees.

In Massachusetts both mentorship programs I’m familiar with recruit primarily corporate volunteers, and immerse them in introductory orientations on par with orientations I received as a Court Appointed Special Advocate or foster parent. Volunteer engagement keeps volunteers feeling like a connected corps, connected by passion for mentoring. I’ve observed professionals who had no exposure to foster care build on initial mentorship connections by making further investments in young adults as tenants, employees, students and apprentices, community leaders, and the next generation of compassionate parents. I feel old sharing this, but I’ve been involved with this program long enough to see former mentees return as mentors, and to babysit for one of my mentees’ babies!

This bill empowers young people with lived experience to design a model that maximizes the skillsets of mentors, enhanced by expertise of workforce champions who have been streamlining career and financial literacy pathways for youth in care for years.

Representative Melanie Sachs, her co-sponsors, and the stakeholders they’ve consulted, have researched the most innovative mentorship models that are working in other states. Data from these models show positive socio-economic ROI. As a taxpayer, this is an investment I think well worth making.

Thank you for your consideration, and for your support of our community's most deserving young adults.