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**Testimony of Representative Melanie Sachs introducing  
*LD 802, Resolve, Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Design a  
Mentoring Program for Youth Who Have Extended Care and Support Agreements with the  
Department*  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Melanie Sachs, and I am honored to represent the community of Freeport in the Maine Legislature.

I am before you today to introduce *LD 802, Resolve, Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Design a Mentoring Program for Youth Who Have Extended Care and Support Agreements with the Department*.

This bill, like all the best bills, was inspired by several constituents in Freeport. They are deeply committed to the children who are part of the foster care system here in Maine and have extensive experience and many years supporting them. Per the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), as of January 2025 there were 2,373 Maine children in our foster care system. Of these children, approximately 247, or about 10%, have voluntary extended care agreements with OCFS.

A person is eligible to enter into a voluntary extended care agreement<sup>1</sup> with the state if that person attained “18 years of age while in the care and custody of the State,” is between the ages of 18-23, and is enrolled in some sort of educational program, or is working at least part-time or is enrolled in a workforce training program, or has other special circumstances, including documented medical or behavioral health conditions.

The challenges of youth who are “aging out” of the foster care system are well documented. Per the Annie E. Casey Foundation “The transition to adulthood is a significant and challenging developmental phase of life for all young people, but emancipated youth must endure this phase without the support of a loving family and absent the familiar supports of the foster care system. For too many, the road ahead is far from easy. Compared to their general population peers,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/22/title22sec4037-A.html>

young people who have aged out of foster care are more likely to experience behavioral, mental and physical health issues.”<sup>2</sup>

According to the same study, they are also more likely to endure challenges, such as:

- housing instability
- joblessness
- academic difficulties
- early parenthood
- substance use

The Maine Education Policy Research Institute also noted in a March 2025 report that the 57% graduation rate for Maine foster care youth in 2022 was the lowest of any for students classified as being from “Challenging Home Situations”, including those identified as unhoused (59%), or economically disadvantaged (78%).

Youth with extended service agreements are in large part “aged out” of the system but maintain a thin connection with services. There are six Transition specialists in the OCFS to support all Maine youth who are moving out of the foster care system. These specialists, per the supervisor of the program, confirm continued participation in the agreement extended care terms with a youth (such as employment, training or academic program) and provide resource lists during monthly contacts. There is one part-time alumnus of Maine’s foster care program who serves as a Navigator, who may help connect with resources when contacted. Finally, there are three alumni who are serving as Alumni Ambassadors to assist with Policy, Data and Facilitation based on their interests, but do not provide direct service or contact, through the Youth Leadership Advisory Team (or YLAT). YLAT is a joint project between Maine’s Youth in Foster Care, The Maine Department of Health and Human Services and the Muskie School at University of Southern Maine, committed to improving the short-term and long-term outcomes for youth who are or have been in foster care.

In meetings and discussions with providers, OCFS, and with both current participants and alumni of Maine’s foster care program, it was repeatedly noted there is a significant gap in ensuring connection and following through on these programs and resources. There are some programs that you will hear about today, including in OCFS Director Johnson’s testimony, that may be available to youth transitioning out of the foster care system, but accessing these resources depends on time, capacity and often require access to resources such as a computer or transportation, or even an understanding of how the listed program can help. Intentional support and guidance are needed to not only take advantage of these programs, but also to address the many questions we all have during the transition to adulthood, as you will hear detailed in testimony today from alumni of the program, parents and advocates.

In the course of these discussions, a sustainable, evidenced-based mentoring program that can integrate public/private partnerships (in both volunteers and resources), and which can provide dedicated support to a youth with an extended care agreement, was identified as a solution which could possibly meet many of these needs. The group identified several evidence-based models, and YLAT discussed several of them with several alumni of the program. It was felt that broader

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-happens-to-youth-aging-out-of-foster-care>

conversations with impacted youth and community partners should be pursued before full investment in any one model could be selected.

Possible models include HEERO<sup>3</sup>, Silver Lining<sup>4</sup> and Open Table<sup>5</sup> (The White Paper on the Open Table model is linked.<sup>6</sup>) Many of them use the extensive research base of wraparound services, an established evidence-based practice, which I know many members of this committee are familiar with. As noted in the Open Table research, “studies show that support, when tailored to the individual needs of consumers, with high levels of consumer voice and choice and backed by specific plans to address unmet needs, is effective in addressing complex long term needs central to living in the community, and to movement out of poverty.”

Proposals to establish a sustainable mentoring program are unfortunately not new. In 2020, partners in Maine from housing groups, the Department of Labor and YLAT applied for a grant to explore this model similar to Open Table which was not successful. Yet the need remains.

I have been a licensed social worker for almost 30 years. I intentionally offer this proposal as a pilot because I know the best policies come when things are not proposed “for” a group, without involving the group — “Nothing for us, without us.” This bill proposes evaluating models with youth and alumni using multiple data collection points and data analysis, with support to make that participation possible. It places the input of youth central to the selection of this model. The report that will be submitted to this committee must include not only provider and department recommendations, but also those specifically offered by the participants themselves.

One additional note, since the fiscal note was issued, I have worked with the department to clarify the intent of this bill is a pilot and targeted data collection process. It was determined that this can be done most efficiently by extending an existing DHHS contract that already has the infrastructure in place and connection to this population.

I offer an amendment to my bill which directs the Department of Health and Human Services to add an additional \$20,000 to the existing contract with the Youth Leadership Advisory Team (University of Maine System, DBA University of Southern Maine; contract CFS-25-627, ending 6/30/2026) to evaluate mentoring program options for youth who have extended care and support agreements with the department.

Thank you for your time, and for the opportunity to submit this bill for your consideration.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://heero.ca/services/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.silverliningmentoring.org/institute-training-consulting/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theopentable.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Open-Table-Model-for-Transition-Age-Youth-TAY.pdf>