

Testimony of Melissa Hackett
Coordinator of the Maine Child Welfare Action Network
Neither for nor against LD 891, An Act to Exclude Poverty as a Factor When Determining
Instances of Willful Neglect of Abuse of a Child
April 8, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Melissa Hackett. In my role as a Policy Associate with the Maine Children's Alliance, I serve as the Coordinator for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network, a group of organizations and individuals taking collective action to ensure the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families in Maine.

I am providing testimony neither for nor against this legislation. Generally, I would suggest the committee consider this bill alongside LD 1406, as they both focus on statutory changes to differentiate between poverty and neglect in our state's definition of abuse and neglect. While this bill goes beyond just this distinction, I will constrain further information specific to differentiating between poverty and neglect.

My testimony on LD 1406 provides more context for our support for this consideration, including a broad scope of work done in partnership with OCFS, that resulted in a Mandated Reporting and Community Supporting initiative, with a final report out and opportunities for action identified and being implemented. One of these actions was to clarify that poverty is not neglect in our state's definition of abuse and neglect.

As it relates to the specific language of this bill, I would offer the following questions for consideration. Does the language proposed here compare to or align with any other states and their definitions of abuse and neglect? And, is the term "poverty" sufficiently detailed for those who need to interpret this definition? Changing statute is delicate and important work, with significant implications for practice.

We should be careful and thoughtful in making changes to our state's definition of abuse and neglect, to ensure any changes bring greater clarity and specificity to how we should distinguish between poverty and neglect.

Thank you.