



**Testimony in Support of LD 1261: An Act to Create a Pilot Community Navigator Program to Improve Supports and Resources to Families**

**Heidi Aakjer, Executive Director, Maine Children's Trust**

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Good afternoon, Sen. Ingwerson, Rep. Meyer, and Distinguished Committee Members, my name is Heidi Aakjer and I'm the Executive Director of Maine Children's Trust. I have worked in child abuse prevention and child well-being efforts for over 20 years to include 9 of those years here in Maine working directly with the Maine Prevention Councils who this legislation would support.

**Maine Children's Trust** is a 501(c)3 non-profit governed by a Board of Directors. The Trust provides leadership and coordination of efforts throughout Maine to prevent child abuse and neglect. We are the only statewide organization solely focused on preventing child abuse and neglect before it occurs. Our mission is to strengthen families, promote healthy relationships, and support communities to prevent child abuse and neglect. Simply put - child abuse prevention means strengthening child and family well-being, which keeps children safe.

Through contracts with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), MCT is responsible for providing the oversight and the system supports for the **Maine Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Councils** (informally known as the Maine Prevention Councils). This includes management, technical assistance, training, quality assurance and improvement, data collection, and reporting. Maine Children's Trust has supported the Maine Prevention Councils since the 1990s through grants, awareness, and technical assistance. Since 2008, DHHS has partnered with the Trust to lead and coordinate statewide child abuse prevention efforts. In 2015, DHHS provided funding to establish a formal statewide infrastructure for the Maine Prevention Councils, which statutorily serve as county-level coordinators for prevention programs and supports. The Maine Prevention Councils provide community-based support services directly to local families, professionals, and the communities within their respective county. **Piloting Community Navigators would be a welcome addition to intentionally enhance and connect with available services to families who are screened out from child welfare services who may have been misidentified with a family's inability to feed, clothe, house their children, etc.** This pilot would bolster efforts for community outreach to both families and mandated reporters to provide a pathway to directly support families with their immediate needs as well as provide a referral pathway for professionals (and mandated reporters) for families who may be falling through a gap in support services. A Community Navigator would be able to connect with mandated reporters who most often have daily interactions with children (such as school or child care staff) that may have a concern about a family but feel or is unaware of an alternative option to child welfare to get help for a family.

**LD 1261 proposes a cost savings by deterring families from child welfare involvement. In 2023, in Maine 20,300 cases were screened out by OCFS.** Piloting Community Navigators *to support screened out families* to an embedded community-based and family support organization that is free, without restrictions, or stigma is needed. I urge you to support LD 1261.