

Testimony of Melissa Hackett

In support of LD 1261, An Act to Support At-risk Families by Establishing the Community Navigator Pilot Program

To the Health and Human Services Committee

April 9, 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.

The Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan importantly lifts up the shared responsibility and role that everyone must play in keeping children safe by keeping families strong. Far too often, families are reported to the state child welfare agency when earlier supports and services could have been put into place to address challenges. While everyone has a role to play, there are some entities in our communities that are best poised to directly support families and develop and sustain broader supportive communities that children and families rely on, especially when times are hard.

The statewide network of Prevention Councils are one such entity. As you heard in support of LD 1061, these community-based organizations provide universal support for families, with parenting education, parent support groups, referrals to other resources and services, and providing concrete supports like diapers. They also host community events that bring families together for social connection that can establish relationships of mutual support. They also provide training for mandated reporters, and could be more of a support to those individuals in determining how and in what instances reports of suspected abuse or neglect should be made, and when a family could be provided with supports without the need for state child welfare agency intervention.

To build a proactive child and family well-being system, we must enhance and develop new ways to ensure the appropriate intervention is made available when concerns about a family are made to the child abuse and neglect hotline. Maine's hotline historically and currently provides a binary response to concerns of abuse or neglect: reports are either screened-in or screened-out. The child welfare agency is not designed to provide or refer services to most families who are screened out as inappropriate for investigation. Recognizing that a child protection investigation is not always the most appropriate intervention, it is important to focus efforts to support reporters and families to connect with resources and supports in their community.

There is a gap in support for families who don't rise to the level of an investigation but could benefit from community support. As part of a Casey convening of states and jurisdictions working on mandated reporting, the Maine team was made aware of a promising program in NH that was working to fill that gap through a Community Navigator Program. The program, housed in a non-profit community service agency, provides outreach to families and mandated reporters, to enhance their knowledge of available community services and resources. The goal is to help educate mandated reporters and provide them with a concrete way to work directly with families in need, and to help families navigate and engage with available community resources. This approach can improve child and family well-being and prevent the need for more intensive child welfare agency involvement.

Pilot sites hosting Community Navigators will deliver services on screened out reports appropriate for follow-up by:

- Engaging mandated reporters through outreach and education on ways to support a family and making referrals to community services
- Connecting families identified through Intake screened out reports to community resources and referrals

The Prevention Councils are already well positioned to pilot this work. This legislation will support two years of funding for 4 Community Navigator positions located in 4 Prevention Councils in the state (1 per site), based on their readiness to participate in the pilot program. Estimated cost: \$90,000 per position = \$360,000 annually.

I hope you will join me in supporting this legislation. Thank you.