



# BEHAVIORAL HEALTH COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE

*Working together to promote quality lives*

## Testimony in Support

### **LD 740: An Act to Establish a Comprehensive Program to Divert Youth from the Criminal Justice System and Address Their Needs**

Representative Grayson Lookner

April 17, 2025

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and esteemed members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Betsy Sweet, and I am presenting testimony on behalf of the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative (BHCC) in strong support of LD 740. BHCC is a group of seven community mental health agencies that together serve over 70% of Maine's people who seek mental health treatment. LD 740 would establish a structured diversion program to redirect youth from the criminal justice system toward more appropriate services tailored to their individual needs.

This legislation addresses a critical finding from the 2020 Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment, which revealed that in 53% of youth detention cases, the reason cited was simply to "provide care" for youth rather than to address genuine public safety concerns.

The proposed juvenile needs assessment process would create a crucial opportunity to identify the underlying issues that lead youth to engage in problematic behaviors. By connecting these young people with appropriate services before becoming formally involved in the justice system, we can better serve the youth and our communities.

The bill's emphasis on high-fidelity wraparound services aligns perfectly with what research shows works best for youth with complex needs. The assessment found that 69% of committed youth had received behavioral health services in the year before commitment, and 65% had a history of at least one child welfare investigation. These statistics demonstrate that many justice-involved youth have significant unmet needs that the system fails to address effectively.

Further, utilizing an assessment tool followed by targeted treatment is cost-effective. Connecting youth and family to care can further reduce unnecessary system involvement. Untreated behavioral health often leads to a revolving door in and out of the criminal legal system. It's expensive and does nothing to better our community's public safety.

LD 740 represents a thoughtful, evidence-based approach to juvenile justice that prioritizes addressing the actual needs of youth while enhancing public safety through more effective interventions. It would help ensure that detention is used only when necessary for public safety rather than as a default response when appropriate services are lacking.

I urge you to support this critical legislation, which will help Maine create a more effective, humane, and cost-efficient juvenile justice system.

Thank you for your consideration. I'd be pleased to answer any questions you may have.