

Testimony of Melissa Hackett  
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In opposition to LD 1459, An Act to Make General Assistance Officers Mandated Reporters  
April 28, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Melissa Hackett. I am a policy associate with the Maine Children's Alliance, where I serve as the coordinator for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network, a group of organizations and individuals committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all children, youth, and families in Maine. I offer testimony today in opposition to LD 1459.

As you may recall, the Maine Child Welfare Action (MCWAN) is partnering with the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) in a Mandated Reporting and Community Support for Families (MR\_CS) initiative. This effort was developed in response to significant feedback we received in the development of Maine's Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan. We recently released a report on the activities of the MR\_CS work, which outlines our process, lessons learned, and opportunities for action.

One of the components of that initial work was to consider Maine's mandated reporting laws related to suspected child abuse and neglect, including who is a mandated reporter, under what circumstances they must make a report, and what training and support they may get to aid in their decision-making and understanding of the process.

In Maine, anyone who suspects child abuse or neglect can make a report to the hotline, but some professionals are mandated reporters. Through the MR\_CS work, we developed the following shared understanding:

"Maine has a broad definition of child abuse and neglect, and a lengthy list of individuals and professionals who are mandated reporters. This has implications for reporting. Mandated reporters often noted the weight of their liability in whether to make a report, given that their licensure or credential might be at risk. Significant feedback was also shared regarding the lack of clarity around neglect, and the importance of training and the need for more of it, ideally in person, with greater frequency."

Currently, there are 32 different professional types listed as mandated reporters, spanning from those we might expect to see included in this list – like health care professionals and teachers – to those we might have not assumed would be on such a list – like a municipal code enforcement official or a homemaker. We should consider that the original intent with

state mandated reporting laws was to ensure that medical providers who saw evidence of persistent physical abuse (“battered child syndrome”) would be required to report that to state child welfare agencies, so they could respond to protect children in those circumstances. Maine’s current list has significantly expanded over time, and there are implications for that. There are also particular and concerning implications with having someone providing General Assistance being a mandated reporter; this risks conflating resource needs and financial assistance (i.e. poverty) with child abuse and neglect, something this committee has recently pondered and asserted that distinction should be clear.

Mandated reporters have shared they experience significant pressure related to their liability to make a report of suspected abuse or neglect. They also share there is limited training and support for them in understanding when they should make a report. This often leads to reporting of situations that do not rise to the level of child abuse or neglect. When families are reported, they will be less likely to ask for help again. Inappropriate reports to the child welfare agency also strain its capacity to be laser-focused on instances where children are truly unsafe.

We should be cautious in expanding the size and scope of mandated reporting in our state, given these various factors. It is also important to note that someone does not have to be a mandated reporter to make a report of suspected abuse or neglect. Nothing prevents anyone from making a report to the hotline when they are seriously concerned about the safety of a child. With these things in mind, we encourage the committee to vote ought not to pass on this legislation.

Thank you.