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Good morning Distinguished Members of the HHS Committee. My name is Rachel Bousquet, and I am the Executive Director for KidsPeace New England Programs for Children Services, which provides inpatient and outpatient programs for Maine's children.

I support this bill LD 1745, An Act to Stabilize Residential Treatment Capacity for Children and Youth in Maine. The youth mental health crisis we're experiencing demands immediate and sustainable solutions. Contrary to its values, Maine is failing their children.

Maine's children are struggling with unprecedented mental health challenges consider the fact that more than half of all children in the state require benefits from MaineCare. Or, we could acknowledge that today more than 2,300 Maine youth are in state custody -- and recognize what that actually means: they endure prolonged stays in hospital emergency rooms, kept at the Long Creek juvenile detention center, housed in hotel rooms staffed by caseworkers, or sent to out-of-state care, all because of the lack of foster families and an insufficient capacity of behavioral health services in their communities.

These stopgap measures have two things in common -- they're expensive, and they don't provide access to services that our kids need in their homes, with their families, or in their community, only adding to their trauma. Waitlists for these underfunded options can stretch into months or even years. Meanwhile, law enforcement, emergency personnel, and community behavioral health providers, particularly those in rural areas, are overtaxed, and parents and caregivers are at a loss in trying to navigate a complex system and advocate for their kids to get the right care.-

In children's residential treatment, the situation is even more grim. There are today 181 licensed beds remaining, a fraction of our former capacity. Two more programs have closed since this year alone. Of those licensed beds, only twenty are available for children with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Because of staffing shortages and rising levels of acuity, the system can only manage to have 126 beds online throughout the state. This results in children being sent out of state -- as of putting together this testimony, 66 Maine children are residing in out of state facilities, removed from their families, friends, and communities, to only further complicate their treatment journey and introducing additional trauma. And out of 76 children currently awaiting residential placement, half have been approved for out-of-state placement.

Maine must adequately fund services here to ensure a robust, and responsive full continuum of care rather than send Maine taxpayer dollars to other states to deliver these services that we can provide in their home state and likely within their community. This is millions of dollars annually. Investing in our workforce allows a stronger economy in Maine and building a better tomorrow. Children are our greatest resource, investing in our behavioral healthcare system, will create longer term solutions for Maine.

LD1745 is an important step towards better understanding the full picture of our system and the resources we as providers need to safely and effectively deliver care for these children while making sure that the avalanche of facility closures leaving our children and families with fewer and fewer options finally comes to a stop. LD1745 also makes important improvements to the aftercare service model -- allowing us to keep providing this critical intermediary service to ensure our children can successfully transition back into their homes following

discharge. The program model needs to take into consideration the full costs of providing this service (such as travel, no-show appointments, etc.) will enable us to keep this service available to our families.

Children in Maine do not need sympathy, they need us to step in. The scars of a broken system never disappear, and so much damage and trauma has already been done, but we still have time to rewrite the future for every child who still hopes for safety, love, and a place to call home -- because that's what they should expect from a state that takes care of its kids. This legislation will benefit Maine communities for generations. Children who receive appropriate mental health support become more resilient, productive citizens. By addressing these needs now, we reduce future costs across healthcare, criminal justice, and social service systems.

Respectfully Submitted,

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