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Testimony of the Commissioner's Office
Maine Department of Health and Human Services

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Neither nor for against LD 1893 *An Act to Establish an Independent Office of the Child Advocate*

Sponsor: Representative Gramlich
Hearing Date: May 9, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Abby Stivers, and I serve as the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. I am here today to testify neither for nor against LD 1893, *An Act to Establish an Independent Office of the Child Advocate*.

This bill would establish an Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to replace the Child Welfare Ombudsman program. The advocate would be authorized to receive information regarding "critical incidents" from any executive branch agency that has custody of a child or who provides services to or arranges services for a child.

The Department would like more time to consider this proposal. If enacted, it would have extensive reach throughout state government. The requirements for the OCA as outlined in this bill would touch the majority (if not all) of offices within the Department and multiple executive branch agencies, including the Department of Public Safety/Maine State Police, Department of Education, and Department of Corrections. This is because pursuant to LD 1893, any of these entities could be considered to be providing services to or arranging services on behalf of a child.

DHHS recognizes that this bill, in repealing and replacing the current Child Welfare Ombudsman (CWO) program, seeks to strengthen oversight and the Department is interested in exploring this option. Specific to OCFS' child welfare operations, significant oversight of OCFS' work already exists. This includes, but is not limited to, federal regulatory oversight, legislative oversight, and the oversight of several panels comprised of child welfare stakeholders (the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel, Justice for Children Task Force, and the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel). The State is well served by an existing Child Welfare Ombudsman Program, which has recently been expanded following collaborative investment by the Executive and Legislative branches. The Government Oversight Committee has also provided oversight in recent years. Given the extensive oversight of OCFS currently in place, new frameworks like LD 1893 require more thoughtful consideration and engagement with interested parties than we can occur during this session.