

Testimony of Melissa Hackett
Coordinator, Maine Child Welfare Action Network
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Health and Human Services Committee
LD 555: An Act to Create a Separate Department of Child and Family Services

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 (MCA). We serve as the backbone, and I serve as the coordinator, for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network. I am here today to testify neither for nor against this legislation, on behalf of both entities.

Overall, both MCA and the Network support the idea of considering the optimal structure for the delivery of services for children, youth, and families. We have made recommendations in the past suggesting as much, and most recently, supported legislation to create a commission to study this topic, specifically around the Department of Health and Human Services. Some other states have done intentional work to restructure services to improve outcomes for children and families. We generally support placing attention and allocating resources to ensure services are optimally structured to be most effective to meet the needs of children and families.

With that said, we have concerns about this legislation as a vehicle to achieve this.

First, this is prescriptive restructuring, with possible unintended consequences, like creating departmental silos between Medicaid and some services for children and families that could utilize it as a funding source. We would support a more process-driven approach - something more like the Blue Ribbon Commission that studied DHHS during the 131st Legislature, or a task force directed by the executive branch to do something similar. I would note that Commission chose not to make a recommendation regarding a new department.

There is also the question of timing and feasibility. We have real concerns about advancing such significant changes to the structure of such a large and important department, at a time when the federal government is pushing fiscal and logistical challenges to our state that will require significant attention and resources, specifically for Medicaid and SNAP, which are housed in DHHS.

A few other items of note in considering a new department of services for children and families. Any discussion should include a consideration of services that may currently be housed in other departments, like juvenile justice in Corrections and early care programs in Education.

We appreciate the attention this committee, and other members of the Legislature, have given to consider how to optimize the delivery of services for children and families in Maine. However, we have concerns about this particular bill and the timing of it as a feasible policy solution to

address the current challenges to child and family well-being and the role of government in supporting that.

Rather than resourcing restructuring right now, when the current system is already under stress, and which would take time for children and families to experience possible benefits from, we would recommend the Legislature focus resources on sustaining, and ideally enhancing, the state-funded array of services children and families depend on for their well-being. This includes policy proposals related to food, health care, child care, housing, mental health, substance use, and domestic violence. We don't have to wonder if these things will help children and families – we know from the research and evidence that they do. It is the best bang for our buck, and it is what is most critical to meet the urgent needs of children and families right now.

We urge the committee to keep this in mind as it considers this and future legislation that represent opportunities to invest most effectively to ensure the best outcomes for the children, youth, and families of Maine. Thank you.