

In-Support LD 2065

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Kristie Worster, and I am the Chief Program Officer at Sweetser. I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and have been working in the behavioral health field in Maine for 19 years.

I am here today to testify in support of LD 2065 and to underscore the critical importance of one-time funding to support the construction of a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) for at-risk youth.

The PRTF will be the only facility of its kind in Maine—providing the safety of an inpatient setting within a residential environment, reducing stigma, and supporting a smoother transition back home for children served in this setting. An 8,000 square foot, 16-bed facility, the unit is staffed with a full-time Medical Director and Clinical Director providing 24/7 psychiatric, nursing, and clinical coverage with crisis staff, CNAs, and Behavioral Health Professionals. Children will spend six to nine months receiving the right level of care at the right time, close to their families and communities.

No longer will our children be sent to facilities in Georgia or Arkansas. No longer will they remain in inpatient units or emergency departments for months while awaiting appropriate care. The PRTF will typically serve children ages 10–18 who require a secure setting for their own safety and the safety of others. These young people may experience suicidal behavior, aggression, attempts to run away, or other highly dangerous behaviors. They may have trauma-related diagnoses, mood or psychotic disorders, or personality disorders.

This facility will serve youth and families in every corner of Maine, from all 16 counties. Treatment is highly structured and intensive, designed for youth with the most severe psychiatric illnesses. Services will also include care for co-occurring substance use disorders, youth with problem sexualized behaviors, and children with secondary developmental disabilities. In addition to safety and stabilization, treatment will focus on facilitating a successful transition back home.

PRTFs ensure the highest level of quality, safety, and regulatory compliance. The facility will be accredited by the Council on Accreditation (COA), comply with federal Conditions of Participation under the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), and be state licensed—each requiring rigorous standards and measurable outcomes.

As we work to see this project through to completion, cost-saving ideas such as reducing the facility from 16 to 8 beds were explored. Ultimately, we found this would not produce a meaningful outcome. Most expenses are fixed and driven by safety, regulatory, and licensing requirements, like others have mentioned—not by bed count. The same life safety systems, HVAC, security, emergency power, and clinical support spaces are required regardless of the unit's size. Downsizing would significantly reduce capacity, increase the cost per bed, and provide only limited savings.

Every day that passes is another day without treatment for so many children in Maine, and I urge you to approve the one-time funding for the PRTF so we can begin this vital work as soon as possible.

Kristie Worster

Chief Program Officer