

In-Support LD 2212

Senator Rotundo, Rep. Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of both the Appropriations and Health & Human Services Committees, I'm Kristie Worster, Chief Program Officer at Sweetser. I am here today in support of the Governor's supplemental budget, and we deeply appreciate the administration's focus on prioritizing youth mental health.

I would like to highlight two critical items: the remaining capital construction funding needed for a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF), which is included in the proposal before you, and the urgent need to stabilize children's residential care.

The PRTF will be the first of its kind in Maine—a 16-bed, 8,000-square-foot facility providing the safety of an inpatient setting within a residential environment. This facility will serve youth ages 10–18 from all 16 counties who experience severe psychiatric crises, including suicidal behavior and trauma-related disorders. With 24/7 psychiatric and clinical coverage, children will receive intensive care close to their families. Families will have access to a free family apartment, so if a family would like to be part of the healing journey, they can do so without worrying about cost, something that isn't afforded to them today.

While we explored cost-saving measures, such as reducing the facility to 8 beds, fixed costs for life safety systems, security, and HVAC remain the same regardless of bed count. Downsizing would only reduce capacity and increase the cost per bed.

This last remaining capital funding referenced in this budget will secure this project's completion.

However, while we build hope for the future, we must also stabilize the present.

Children's residential units, another critical level in the continuum of care, are currently on life support. Sweetser is one of only a handful of organizations still providing children's residential services. In the last two years, we have been forced to close 16 of our 32 beds due to staffing shortages and the lack of financial support. Over the past three years, Sweetser has experienced operating losses totaling approximately \$2.4 million in our children's residential care programs alone. This is not sustainable for anyone to operate and strains an already fragile system.

We know that the cost of a closed residential bed does not disappear; it simply shifts to emergency departments, out-of-state placements, and higher-cost systems. Once residential capacity is lost, it is extraordinarily difficult and expensive to rebuild.

We ask that a short-term stabilization fund be included in the supplemental budget, as rate structures that better align with the actual costs of running these programs are being pursued. Without an immediate stopgap measure to stabilize the remaining units, more units will close their doors.

We appreciate the HHS Committee for recognizing the difficulties with the current system, and we hope this can be included in the future iteration of this budget.

By addressing both the long-term and short-term crises facing youth behavioral health programs, we can strengthen the system for every Maine family and every child in need. This is our collective moment for stepping up for Maine's next generation.

Thank you for your time and your continued commitment to Maine's youth.

Kristie Worster
Chief Program Officer