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Testimony against LD 761, "An Act to Amend the Laws Governing the Crime of Endangering the Welfare of a Child and to Create the Crime of Aggravated Endangering the Welfare of a Child"

Sen. Beebe-Center, Rep. Salisbury and members of the CJPS committee:

My name is Sydney R. Sewall, MD MPH and I am a resident of Hallowell and a pediatrician. I write representing the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, an organization of over 300 health care providers who focus on the care of children. Our members are often on the front lines of child abuse evaluations.

While the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) are now recognized as important determinants of many medical conditions, in the area of **child abuse and neglect** they are paramount. A substantial proportion of the perpetrators were abused themselves as children. Poverty, substance use disorder, mental illness, domestic violence – one or more of these factors are universally involved. It is unlikely that enhancing the punishments related to abusive conduct will induce any changes in behavior and decrease the frequency of these events.

The multiple tragic child deaths that occurred last year were extremely upsetting – and certainly are an inducement to take legislative action to prevent repeat events. We worry that this bill as crafted, however, may have unintended consequences.

While we as a society wrestle with the complex factors that lead to dysfunctional parenting, a key component of prevention are reports from neighbors and relatives concerned about a child's safety. It is not easy emotionally to make these calls – and we need to emphasize to the public that their primary purpose is to obtain services for the child and not punishment for the involved adults. This bill has the potential to blur the distinction between DHHS and the police, inhibiting reporting and delaying interventions.

Thus, while we applaud the intent of the bill we fear that the bill as written is in unlikely to achieve its stated goals.

Sincerely,

Sydney R. Sewall, MD MPH
Hallowell