

Statement of Abbie Strout-Bentes, Director of Education and Community Engagement, Mabel Wadsworth Center to the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

March 24, 2023

LD 761 Ought Not to Pass

Thank you, Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and members of the joint committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, for reviewing my testimony. I am Abbie Strout-Bentes, the Director of Education and Community Engagement at Mabel Wadsworth Center. Mabel Wadsworth Center is the only independent, not-for-profit, feminist health center in Maine. We provide comprehensive, gender-affirming sexual and reproductive healthcare, prenatal and postpartum care, abortion care, mental health counseling, and primary care. Our Center has offered sexual and reproductive healthcare for folks living in the greater Bangor area for almost four decades. We have an excellent reputation in our community for providing high-quality, person-centered, and trauma-informed healthcare.

I am writing on behalf of our organization to encourage you to oppose 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.

One thing we can all agree on is that every child deserves to be in a safe home. It is essential that we take a preventative approach to child safety and focus our efforts on ensuring families have the resources and support they need to take care of themselves and their children, including access to affordable childcare, healthcare and housing, mental health counseling, paid medical leave, and the ability to seek help when they are struggling to cope without fear of criminalization. A bill punishing parents after the occurrence does nothing to make children safer and instead can lead to additional harm.

As a healthcare provider, our biggest concern with this bill is that it will disincentivize people from seeking medical treatment for their kids out of fear and avoiding care until it becomes an emergency. This bill would put people experiencing abuse in their relationship, who are disproportionately women, in the impossible position of deciding whether or not to seek care for their child. When they know seeking care could result in a ten-year prison sentence and the possibility of losing custody of their child to an abusive person who will continue to cause harm, the decision to treat their kid's injuries at home is a preventative measure to reduce the risk of further harm. No one should ever be forced to make that choice, and we must ensure that seeking healthcare is safe for every member of our community.

This bill is not the answer and will not protect children. We must take a preventative approach, not punitive, and invest in the well-being of people in our communities. When parents, especially mothers, thrive, it creates an environment where their children can too. We urge you to vote "ought not to pass." Thank you.