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To the honorable Sen. Joseph Rafferty, Rep. Michael Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

I speak today in support of bills that enhance and rebuild our early intervention system. As a Maine native and retired Midcoast pediatrician of 30-plus years, I have many experiences with the CDS system.

Maine's CDS/Early Intervention program was built with sound ideas. Identify children age 0-5 years who have developmental delays and needs. Refer them for further evaluation, and do this in their own environment. Provide treatment and monitoring without cost to families.

I saw this system collapse over recent years. (Kids' Count data: Maine is 50th in the US for these services.). Causes for the decline range from office dysfunction to family stresses, but many are attributable to the decline of CDS itself due to lack of support. Here are a few recent stories, as we need to desperately rebuild this system.

As the CDS referral sites became fewer and the staffing more lean, services dwindled as well. A small county such as Sagadahoc could see referrals sent to three different/ other counties, creating confusion from the start. The farther a CDS office is from a client, the less likely any visit will occur. The leaner the staff, the longer the wait. Distance and delays translate into complete inaction. The majority of referrals that I made evaporated, many for unclear reasons.

Stories that I heard from parents:

"They never called". "Someone called but I don't know who they were." "They can't come for months." "We couldn't arrange a time."

Other stories heard if a connection was made include:

"They don't have a speech therapist so can't help". "They agree that there is need for treatment but don't have the manpower." "They gave us some stuff to do at home and will check back in a year." "They agree that there are many areas of need but can only provide treatment for one of them."

We know that early intervention for developmental problems, ie catching and treating these delays early, pays off in big ways. A child who is on track with skills has fewer behavioral and social issues, better connectivity and confidence, and is more ready for kindergarten and society. Please, we need to build a robust network to identify and treat these problems early. It must be efficient, responsive, and available with ample qualified staff in many locations.

This is truly an investment in Maine's future.

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