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**Testimony of Laura Sweet to the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
In Support Of
LD 1632, An Act To Update the Laws Regarding the Maine Educational Center for the
Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the Governor Baxter School for the Deaf**

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the committee. My name is Laura Sweet and I live in Cumberland. I am speaking in support of LD 1632. I am a parent of a deaf child that received services from the Maine Educational Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MECDHH). I am here to share our experience and why it is so important that all families with deaf or hard of hearing children receive the support they need, no matter where they live in Maine.

Our daughter Jane was born in 2014. Her hearing loss was identified soon after birth because of the Maine Newborn Hearing Program. She received hearing aids and began early intervention services at three months old, and underwent cochlear implant surgery at Boston Children's Hospital soon after her first birthday. MECDHH has supported our daughter and our entire family from the beginning.

We are fortunate to live just 20 minutes away from Mackworth Island, which made it much easier to participate in family events, infant and toddler playgroups, special talks by nationally recognized leaders in deaf education, and parent advocacy trainings. Connecting with other families, deaf adults, and professionals was critical, especially in the early months and years as we navigated the complexities of early intervention, communication choices, and language development. These opportunities should be available to all families experiencing the challenges and joys of having a deaf or hard of hearing child across the state, not just those who live within close proximity to Mackworth Island.

Our family chose for Jane to receive Listening and Spoken Language speech therapy services from a highly qualified provider called hear ME now. We also had MECDHH Teacher of the Deaf (TOD) and Deaf mentor home visits as part of Jane's Part C services. Thanks to this early intervention, Jane surpassed her speech and language milestones, so she did not qualify for

an IEP and Part B services when she turned three. MECDHH stepped in and provided a 504 plan for Jane to close the gap until she began school in our local district. Jane attended the Mackworth Island Preschool program part-time, along with mainstream preschool programs in our community. The 504 plan ensured she had the classroom Hearing Assistive Technology (HAT) she needed, and MECDHH provided training and outreach services to her community preschool and monitored Jane's progress. I cannot stress enough how important Jane's experience at the Mackworth Island Preschool was in terms of forming the early stages of her deaf identity and building self-advocacy skills. All deaf and hard of hearing children should benefit from similar early educational programming, regardless of where they live in the state.

Jane is now thriving as a first grader in our local school district, though she does lament feeling "different" as the only deaf cochlear implant user in her school. We are very fortunate to have a TOD on staff in our district, but increased connections between MECDHH, Public School Outreach programming, and our district would greatly benefit staff and students. Cochlear implant and HAT technology changes rapidly, and the educational, communication, social and emotional needs of deaf and hard of hearing students are unique. The expertise, outreach, and training MECDHH can coordinate and provide needs to be available to all school districts statewide.

I hope you will support this bill and Maine's deaf and hard of hearing children. Please feel free to contact me with questions or if I can be of any help.

Sincerely,

Laura Sweet