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## *Testimony of Holly B. Stover*

### **LD 699, An Act to Create a Kinship Care Navigator Program within the Department of Health and Human Services**

#### ***Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services***

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and esteemed Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Holly Stover and I represent the towns of Boothbay, Boothbay Harbor, Southport, Edgecomb, Westport Island and South Bristol in the House of Representatives. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present **LD 699, An Act to Create a Kinship Care Navigator Program within the Department of Health and Human Services**.

This bill requires that the Department of Health and Human Services create one position to oversee all matters related to the placement of a child in kinship care. Kinship care refers to the care of children by relatives or, in some situations, close family friends, (referred to as fictive kin).

There are many reasons a child may need kinship care, but often it is when a tragedy has occurred, such as an untimely death of a parent, an inability of a parent to care for a child because of mental illness or substance use disorder, or other situations where the threshold for jeopardy requires removal of the child. There are often multiple systems that are involved in kinship care, including child welfare, criminal justice, judiciary and domestic violence. We know that there are thousands of grandparents and kinship families raising children in Maine. This trend has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

On a personal level, my brother came to live with my family when his mother (my father's sister) was murdered in a domestic violence homicide/suicide. My younger brother was not yet four years old when this occurred, and he was a witness to the crime. I often think what would have happened to him if he had not had the support and love of his family over the years. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and required intensive trauma supports and intensive therapy. In my opinion, kinship care with my family likely saved his life.

This Kinship Navigator would be embedded within the Department to provide resources, supports, and information about the services needed to support a child in a kinship placement. The provision of information and referral would be helpful in connecting to various therapeutic services and community engagement, including recreation.

These kinship services have been provided through contracted services with an agency provider. This bill proposes an inclusive approach by raising kinship navigation to be inside the Department which provides access to records and information that the Office of Child and Family Services workers are permitted to have. Our

Committee has discussed instances where there is greater value in having a caseworker position internal to the department instead of at a community-based agency.

The goal of this bill is to provide the highest quality kinship care to Maine's children and their families. These are often situations that require a crisis response and having a consistent position within the Department would ensure continuity in the transition and sustainability to kinship care.

Thank you for you listening. I am willing to answer any questions you may have.