

Testimony of Christine Alberi, Child Welfare Ombudsman regarding LD 1263, "An Act To Create a Separate Department of Child and Family Services."

April 13, 2021

Good afternoon Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and the members of the Joint Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Christine Alberi, I am the Child Welfare Ombudsman for Maine.

I am here today to encourage you to carefully consider passage of LD 1263, "An Act To Create a Separate Department of Child and Family Services." The Child Welfare Ombudsman's office is in the unique position of being allowed to directly access child welfare records and review child welfare cases from an independent perspective.

Since 2018, child welfare has undergone significant change and upheaval, and the reform process continues today. The work of child welfare is exceedingly complex, and the Office of Child and Family Services houses both Children's Behavioral Health Services and Child Welfare Services. The children and parents served by the Office of Child and Family Services often require intensive, multi-layered services, sometimes lasting years, and the decision-making around these families requires expertise that is developed over years of training and experience.

The idea of creating a separate department that would focus on the most at-risk children in our state is an interesting concept. In general, the Ombudsman's office is in favor of any additional resources and help that can be directed towards child welfare. As you have heard, the number of children in state custody have increased (though that number has fallen again slightly) in the last several years. There are many factors that have caused pressure on child welfare professionals in our state, beginning with the opiate epidemic and most recently with COVID-19.

The children involved in Child Welfare Services make up a small proportion of children in our state, but they deserve a larger share of our attention. Any child that has entered state custody deserves the best that we have to offer for every moment that we care for that child. We should do everything that we can to improve the situation of these children, and LD 1263 may be an effective step in that direction.

Thank you for your time today.