

Testimony of Virginia S. Marriner, LSW

In Support of LD 1263

An Act To Create a Separate Department of Child and Family Services

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Virginia S. Marriner, a resident of Chelsea, ME, and I wish to offer testimony in support of LD 1263, An Act To Create a Separate Department of Child and Family Services. I am the Executive Director of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Augusta, an independent consultant with the federal DHHS, retired from the Department of Health and Human Services (after a 30 year career in child welfare) and a member of the Board of the Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman's Office, although I wish to speak as a private citizen based on my 30 year history in child welfare in Maine.

I believe that 30 year history with the Office of Child and Family Services provides me with the knowledge and expertise to explain my support of this legislation. My experience goes back to 1969, a graduate of the University of Maine at Orono, a VISTA Volunteer in Chicago, IL and then starting in 1969 as a Child Protective Services (CPS) Caseworker in the Bangor Office of the Department of Health and Welfare. When I left after three years in 1973 to raise my family; of a unit of five caseworkers, I was the senior member. It was a difficult time of no afterhours hotline, no cell phones, inadequate legal protections for parents, and limited training on child abuse and neglect.

I returned in 1986 to the Department of Human Services, now called the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). From 1986 to 2012, I was a CPS Caseworker, a CPS Casework Supervisor, Supervisor of a Pilot Project, Families Together, pairing an experienced CPS Caseworker with a clinician to assess and support families severely impacted by child abuse and neglect, an Adoption Program Supervisor, the State Adoption Program Manager, and the Director of Child Welfare Policy and Practice. As Director of Child Welfare Policy and Practice I was legislative liaison for the Office of Child and Family Services from 2006 to 2012, a member of the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel and instrumental in the development of the Maine Citizen Review Panel. During my time with DHHS, I worked under many Commissioners, some with sound experience in child welfare; several with very limited experience and understanding of the impact child abuse and neglect has on children and families but also on frontline workers, foster and adoptive families, and the community of service providers.

During my 30 years I have seen a great deal of change and growing for DHHS, unfortunately, however, my experience reflected a constant struggle to ensure Child Welfare Services received the attention needed within the huge structure of Health and Human Services. Given the enormity of managing the current Department of Health and Human Services it is extremely difficult for any one Commissioner to be expected to have the expertise in the multiple components of health care, financial assistance, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, licensing rules and regulations, child welfare, and early education. Child Welfare, along with the other programs included in this legislation; Head Start and child care services, maternal and child health services, parentage establishment and child support enforcement services, and residential and long-term care services for children with disabilities, would all significantly

benefit from a more focused, informed, and relevant leadership. It is also difficult to separate the emotional and behavioral health needs of children impacted by trauma from the needs for protection and safety.

I believe that it has been especially evident during the past year that given the size of the current DHHS, there has been an enormous burden on the Commissioner to manage the Covid-19 Pandemic, leaving little room for focus on the wide array of needs within the current DHHS structure. It truly is too large a Department for one person, one Commissioner, to have responsibility to manage and it is only fair, especially for the most vulnerable children of our state, that there is a Department focused on children's needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of LD 1263 and I urge the Committee to vote "ought to pass" or at the very least to consider a Work Group be developed to study the benefits and challenges to be considered in the development of the Department of Child and Family Services with results, findings, and recommendations to be presented at the next Legislative session.

I would be happy to respond to any questions.