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Testimony of the
Office of Aging and Disability Services
Department of Health and Human Services

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human

Neither for Nor Against LD 1360
An Act to Provide Services to Maine's Most Vulnerable Citizens by Eliminating the
Waiting Lists for Certain MaineCare Services

Sponsored by: Senator Keim
Hearing Date: April 21, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Paul Saucier, Director of the Office of Aging and Disability Services. I am here today to speak neither for nor against LD 1360 An Act to Provide Services to Maine's Most Vulnerable Citizens by Eliminating the Waiting Lists for Certain MaineCare Services.

This is the position that the Department has also recommended for a similar bill this session (130th), LD 962. This was also our position last session (129th) when LD 1984 was proposed. As before, the Department supports the intent of all these bills, which is to provide needed supports and services for individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism to live and work as independently as possible in their communities.

The Governor proposed funding in the biennial budget to add 30 individuals to the Section 29 waiver program each month of the upcoming biennium, a total of 720 individuals. This will eliminate the waiting list that exists today and add additional individuals over the course of the biennium. The Department is not recommending adding Section 21 funding at this time, but will continue to serve the highest priority individuals with reserved capacity in that program. The section 21 group home capacity was seriously challenged by the pandemic, with several agencies temporarily closing homes or reducing their capacity. Group home residents and staff were vaccinated early in the pandemic, and outbreaks have been nearly eliminated in those settings. With a significant rate increase proposed by the Governor and approved in the recently enacted budget, providers should be able to gradually restore supports to individuals who temporarily returned to their families during the pandemic. This process will likely take a year or more, during which time there will not be additional capacity in the system to add a significant number of individuals to Section 21.

Maine needs a broader array of choices for individuals and families. The Department has engaged stakeholders in an Innovation Work Group to generate ideas for new support models. If public health conditions allow it, we plan to bring this work to an Innovation Summit in the fall.

Individuals will only benefit from the elimination of waiting lists if it is done sustainably and at good levels of quality. For at least the first half of the biennium, supported by a significant rate increase, the Department and providers must focus on restoring regular operations in the group home sector and re-welcoming individuals who moved elsewhere temporarily during the pandemic. During this time, we will continue our work with all stakeholders to develop additional choices for individuals and families, and we will serve new individuals through the Section 29 program.

Thank you for your time today. I am happy to provide additional information at the work session.