

Kerri Bickford  
Topsham

Testimony In favor of LD 1424 and LD 1302

"Resolve, To Change the Educational Requirements of Behavioral Health Professionals Providing Services for Children"

"Resolve, To Change the Educational Requirements of Certain Behavioral Health Professionals"

Good afternoon Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Kerri Bickford and I come before you today representing Pathways of Maine. Pathways has 9 locations throughout the State of Maine including their headquarters at Brunswick Landing. Pathways is the largest provider of home and community-based treatment (HCT) in the state.

I thank Representatives Salisbury and Stearns for identifying the urgent need for an update and alignment of the requirements to becoming a behavioral health professional (BHP). BHP's are absolutely essential to the mental health community. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to hire BHP's, which in turn affects the ability to provide mental health services, which has led to the current dire situation we face today. In 2016, Pathways employed 91 BHP's in section 65 for home and community based treatment (HCT). We employed 73 BHP's under section 28, specialized home based services for children with autism (RCS). Currently, with the impact of COVID-19, low reimbursement rates, an increase in minimum wage which has led to a severe workforce shortage, we now employ 49 section 65 BHP's and have zero BHP's in section 28 RCS. Pathways, the largest provider of section 28 RCS, stopped providing these services due to the high cost and lack of available staff to hire. Anything that this committee can do through the proposed legislation before us that breaks down the barriers to hiring BHP's is something we wholeheartedly support. By passing this proposed legislation, which comes at no cost, we can begin to address the long wait lists that exist today, especially in rural areas of Maine where there are currently little to no services. Please note that LD 1424 addresses both section 65 and 28, where LD 1302 only focuses on section 28.

It is important for this committee to know the history of our services to children in Maine, and why our mental health system is at a breaking point.

Rates have not kept pace with the increased cost of doing business:

Minimum wage has gone up more than 140%

Health insurance costs have risen more than 200%

Mileage reimbursement rates have gone up 56%

The iPhone hadn't been invented yet. Now cell phones costs us more than \$180,000/yr.

Facilities and utilities costs have risen by nearly 50%

Paperwork was done on paper. Now we must use electronic health records, staff in the field need computers, we need an IT department to keep those computers working. This adds up to almost \$250,000/yr. None of which was accounted for in the rates set in 2005.

As a result:

Waitlists have over 500 children waiting for services, with some children waiting for a year or more.

The need is likely much higher than that, as many families that need HCT aren't even referred for it because it has not been available in their area for years now.

Without HCT, MANY of these kids will experience an unnecessary separation from their families.

Maine will spend an extra \$20 Million or more serving those kids in out of home placements. The long term cost is likely hundreds of millions as research has proven that children served in out of home services are far more likely to depend on services later in life as well.

10 years ago we weren't talking about building lockdown facilities for kids.

10 years ago we weren't sending dozens of kids out of state for services.

10 years ago we didn't have kids lingering in ERs because our residential programs were overwhelmed.

This is because 10 years ago, HCT was much more available in most parts of the state.

It is of utmost concern that we fund Home and community based services across Maine, which we realize is being addressed through many proposed bills. Making it easier to hire BHP's, and creating much needed consistency with the BHP requirements under sections 65 and 28 is a step in the right direction. Please pass LD 1424 unanimously.

Pathways is available to work with the committee, the department and all other interested parties to break down the barriers to hiring a BHP. In addition, as a member of the Alliance, we completely support Malory's testimony and the details she is presenting to the committee today.

Thank you for your time and consideration.