

Testimony of Melissa Hackett  
In support of LD 393  
To the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services  
Tuesday, February 22, 2022

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Melissa Hackett. I am a Policy Associate with the Maine Children's Alliance and the Coordinator for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network. I am here in support of LD 393.

It is essential that we have a robust and ongoing supportive and intensive service system for families experiencing challenges in providing child safety in the home.

A strong child welfare system has adequate and maintained investments across the system. This means state oversight and accountability; coordination with communities to address the underlying conditions in families that can lead to abuse and neglect; a robust and family-centered supportive service array to address challenges; and an effective and resourced Child Protective Services, to provide intensive work with families who have experienced maltreatment to reunify, or to provide supportive permanent placements for children.

The components of this legislation aim to provide investments across this broader child welfare system that incorporates improvements in prevention and intervention services.

The Parents as Teachers home visiting program provides services to strengthen families before there is crisis. For families already involved with child protection, the Homebuilders program provides an evidence-based model to bring stability to the home and support safe reunification. These programs are already part of Maine's Family First Prevention Services state plan, so this investment would bolster their capacity to prevent maltreatment and provide support to families during reunification. We would recommend the committee amend this to reflect that these are investments in both prevention and reunification activities and would be happy to share language to that effect.

Another critical part of supporting families to successfully reunify is ensuring they can meet their basic needs, including maintenance of eligibility for safety net programs that provide for their food, housing, and health care. The Department should assess and consider waivers in situations where parents working to reunify may have these essential benefits reduced or eliminated. Additionally, including a fund for caseworkers to access resources to address challenges families face during reunification provides an important tool in their work to support families.

When children cannot safely remain with their parents, the next best option is to place them with other family. There are roughly 9,000 children being raised by kin with no parent present in Maine. This number represents both formal and informal placements; but all these families need support in navigating resources available to support children in their care. Increasing the number of kinship navigators is a concrete way to provide additional support for those families.

As has been stated before, a core underlying risk factor for abuse and neglect in our state is parental substance use disorder, particularly in rural areas where access to treatment and support is limited. Investments in expanding Recovery Community Centers and treatment services to rural communities through FQHCs is critical to reducing child maltreatment and supporting families struggling with SUD.

There is precedent for investment in a leadership position within DHHS to oversee child welfare activities during periods of reform. From 1999 to 2011, the Director of Special Projects worked for the Office of the Commissioner and then for the Director of OCFS and was responsible for supporting the design and implementation of Maine's previous Child Welfare Strategic Reform Plan. These reforms became a nationally celebrated model by 2009. You will hear more about this position in testimony on LD 1850. Overall, specific title and duties aside, what we hope you take from this is the need for a leadership position in DHHS to oversee and coordinate strategic prevention and intervention activities related to child welfare. It is clear at this moment in time additional leadership is needed at the state level to both manage the daily activities of child welfare and oversee a major systems reform.

There are many parts to this legislation, but they collectively serve to address the potential gaps and cracks that exist in our current child welfare system. They represent needed investments to support families and children in achieving safety and permanency. We urge the committee to support these and welcome any questions. I will also be happy to make myself available at the work session. Thank you.