



FAMILY ADVOCACY OF MAINE

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Testimony of Julian Richter, in partial support of LD 1229: An Act to Support Peer Mentors for Parents Involved in the Child Protective Services System

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Monday April 21, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am offering testimony in partial support of LD 1229, **“An Act to Support Peer Mentors for Parents Involved in the Child Protective Services System.”**

Parent advocates are an important part of a multidisciplinary approach to providing high-quality legal representation to parents. In 2006, the American Bar Association embraced the multidisciplinary approach, including parent advocates, to its standards of legal representation for parents in 2006.¹

The National Association of Child Counsel (“NACC”) *Child Welfare Law and Practice* outlines how “[m]ultidisciplinary team representation results in better outcomes for children – fewer foster care placements, higher and expedited family reunification rates, and more children living with family – which reduces trauma to families and communities and saves money by avoiding unnecessary systemic interventions.”²

Parent or “peer” advocates are generally people that have personal experiences navigating the family regulation system. Their “lived experiences” can be vital to parents that are entering the system. By sharing their experiences, building rapport, and building upon their own experiences, peer advocates can encourage and motivate parents, as well as advocate for the appropriate services to help them navigate the reunification process.

LD 1229 provides funding for *CPS 101*, an important resource for parents entering and attempting to understand the child protective system. As a parent attorney, I believe this is an invaluable resource and the attached funding should allow the program to grow to meet the needs of the community it serves. For this reason, I would urge you to vote “ought to pass” on funding the educational component contained in this bill.

¹ Am. BAR ASS’N STANDARDS OF PRACTICE FOR ATTORNEYS REPRESENTING PARENTS IN ABUSE AND NEGLECT CASES (2006), https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/aba-parent-rep-stds.pdf

² NAT’L ASS’N OF COUNSEL FOR CHILDREN, *Child Welfare and the Law*, 4th Ed. §33.1, 818 (2022).

LD 1229 also provides funding for a parent advocate in each district of the Department of Health and Human Services. While I support the intention of this measure, I would offer that peer advocates should be a part of a multidisciplinary team approach directed by parent counsel as outlined by the ABA standards. The attached funding could be better directed to the Maine Commission on Indigent Legal Services (“MCILS”), and peer advocates could be assigned based upon need as identified by parent attorneys.

As a State, Maine has a long way to go regarding how we approach the issue of child welfare. Part of the change needed is how we better support parents and families in need. To do this, families need to feel that they have a voice and are respected as the “experts” about their own children. By allowing the peer advocates to be employed and controlled by the Department of Health and Human Services, parents may not feel that they are independent voices. Likewise, peer advocates could feel constrained in advancing positions that may differ from the caseworker or Department supervisor.

Notwithstanding the above-noted concern, building a network of “peer advocates” and people with lived experiences is critical to improving outcomes for children and families, as well as understanding the impact of child protective interventions. Peer mentors are an important piece of a needed omnibus approach to improving the system for children and families alike.

Currently, I am the President of the Maine Parental Rights Attorneys Association (“MEPRAA”), Statewide Resource Counsel for Child Protective Cases through the Maine Commission on Indigent Legal Services (“MCLIS”), and a member of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (“MCWAP”). I urged you to vote “ought to pass” on funding the educational component and consider funding peer mentors as part of a multidisciplinary approach to supporting children and families.

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