

## **NASW Maine Testimony on LD 1203: An Act to Provide Grants to Schools That Contract for Behavioral and Mental Health Services**

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

I am Julie Schirmer, a clinical social worker, President of the National Association of Social Workers Maine Chapter (NASW ME) board of directors, and first author of the Maine Behavioral Health Access and Workforce Challenges and Solutions for Maine. This report, uploaded to the testimony website, provides detailed evidence of the problems with access to care and the critical behavioral health workforce shortages, based on our 2024 point-in-time survey, focus groups, and the subsequent Summit of state, organizational, and professional leaders across the state.

Our survey indicates that Maine is facing critical shortages in its behavioral health workforce, revealing that in January of last year, over 10,000 individuals were waiting an average of seven months for clinical behavioral health services. The average organizational clinical vacancy rate was reported to be 22%, with higher rates in rural areas of Maine and in the schools. Focus group participants reported the high vacancy rates are due to the additional collaborative work required with families, concerns about clinician safety, and reimbursement amounts that do not cover the cost of services. Our youth not receiving the care when needed results in sending them out of state, increased risk of incarceration, and parents and extended family members taking time off work to homeschool affected children, monitor their safety, and get them to care. Not getting the care that they need results in poor academic performance, dropping out of school, increased risk of suicide, and prolonged financial disadvantages in the future.

As a clinician with over 25 years of experience in an urban primary care clinic serving an underserved, low-income community, I found that one, if not the most effective settings for children and teens to receive behavioral health services is in their school. Care in the schools allows for easier access than in community settings, supports students in getting to their appointments, and enables parents to avoid being pulled out of work, as well as children being taken out of half-day school sessions, to receive the care they need. Social workers and other behavioral health providers in schools have become a key component of the behavioral health safety net for Maine youth.

As we know, the state and the Department of Justice have recently entered into a settlement agreement after the state was charged with not providing community-based behavioral health services, resulting in the unnecessary institutionalization of Maine Youth. Services have been proposed. Yet, due to the behavioral health provider workforce shortage, few clinicians are available to staff the promised programs in the settlement agreement.

We urge you to pass this important bill to finance the behavioral health safety net for Maine's youth. Without this safety net and access to early treatment, children will not receive the necessary care before more restrictive services are required. Families will suffer emotionally and financially. Our overall workforce will suffer. Fines and extended lawsuits will ensue.

Respectfully submitted,

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President, Board of Directors, NASW ME

**References:**

Settlement Agreement fact sheet: <https://www.justice.gov/crt/media/1378316/dl>