

May 12, 2023

Testimony re: LD 535: “An Act to Increase Access to Necessary Medical Care for Certain Minors” – OUGHT TO PASS

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments in strong support of LD 535. My name is Chris McLaughlin, and I am a licensed clinical social worker with over 22 years of experience providing behavioral health services to children and families across a variety of treatment settings here in Maine. For all of those years, I have worked directly in some capacity with transgender and gender diverse youth and their parents and families. For 2 decades, I have provided training to schools, community organizations, and healthcare facilities around the unique needs of trans- and gender diverse clients. I am also humbled to be the Executive Director of the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW-ME). A large part of my job at NASW-ME is to represent the interests of Maine’s social workers as they endeavor to meet the behavioral health needs of Maine people across all settings and ages from Fort Kent to York and all places in between. On behalf of our over 1000 members here in Maine, I’m honored to share thoughts on this important proposed legislation.

We are firmly in support of LD 535 and would like to offer our sincere gratitude to Representative Sheehan for her work on this important issue. As you might know, gender affirming care encompasses a range of medical treatments and procedures that enable individuals to align their physical appearance with their gender identity. This can include hormone therapy, gender confirmation surgeries, and other forms of medical and psychological care. For many transgender individuals, gender affirming care is essential to their mental and physical well-being and denying them access to these treatments can have devastating consequences. Early intervention is crucial for mental and physical well-being, helping to reduce mental health disparities and improve overall quality of life. Limiting access to gender-affirming care is dangerous. Research has consistently shown that gender-affirming care significantly reduces rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among transgender youth. Leading medical organizations, such as the American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, endorse gender-affirming care as appropriate and necessary treatment for these young individuals.

Unfortunately, there are still many barriers to accessing gender affirming care, including discrimination from healthcare providers, limited insurance coverage, and legislative efforts to restrict access to these treatments. We have seen these legislative restrictions emerge across the country. In fact, at the time I am writing this testimony today, the ACLU has identified 469 anti-LGBTQ+ bills that have been introduced across the country. Many of these bills are efforts to restrict gender-affirming care to some of the most vulnerable individuals in our country today: transgender youth. At the time of this writing, 12 states have enacted laws restricting or banning access to gender-affirming care for minors. Simply put, Maine is better than this. Representative Osher’s bill before you today ensures that the entire country also knows that Maine IS better than this.

To ensure equal access to treatment for all transgender youth, we must eliminate those barriers to gender-affirming care, such as financial burdens, insurance coverage, and geographical limitations. These barriers not only harm individuals seeking care, but also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and discrimination against the transgender community as a whole. Gender-affirming care is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it is implemented through a tailored treatment plan crafted between healthcare experts and their patients and guardians that takes into account each individual's unique needs, goals, and circumstances. NASW ME believes that it is essential whenever possible to involve parents and guardians in the decision-making process, ensuring they are educated and informed about their child's gender-affirming care. When clinically appropriate, implementing an informed consent model allows for a thorough understanding of the potential benefits, risks, and alternatives associated with gender-affirming treatments and strengthens the emotional support system that many transgender youth need to live their best lives possible. Furthermore, increased education and training for healthcare providers, educators, and legislators are necessary to better understand and support the unique needs of

transgender and gender-nonconforming youth. Addressing the harmful impact of discrimination and stigma on transgender youth is vital, and gender-affirming care plays a critical role in mitigating these effects. It is imperative that we work to remove these barriers and ensure that all individuals have access to the gender affirming care they need. This includes passing legislation that protects transgender individuals, especially youth, from discrimination in healthcare settings and ensuring that insurance coverage for gender affirming care is comprehensive and affordable.

Protecting gender affirming care is not only a matter of individual health and well-being, but also a matter of human rights and equality. It's also a matter of dignity, respect, and safety. New data from The Trevor Project (2023) from a study of more than 28,000 LGBTQ young people (aged 13-24) across the United States found that nearly 2 in 3 LGBTQ young people said that hearing about potential state or local laws banning people from discussing LGBTQ people at school made their mental health a lot worse. By supporting gender-affirming care for youth, we are not only promoting their mental and physical well-being, but also fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society for all who live, work, and play in our great State. By passing LD 1735, we are sending a very strong message to our state's transgender and gender-diverse youth that they DO belong here in Maine. I urge this committee to take action to protect the rights of transgender youth and ensure that they have access to the care they need to live full and healthy lives. I want to thank you all for your work on this issue. Please do not hesitate to reach out to NASW ME for any support we can offer, including any social work representation and participation in any future work sessions for LD 535.

Thank you again,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris McLaughlin, LCSW". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Chris McLaughlin, MSW, LCSW
Executive Director
Maine Chapter – NASW