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**TESTIMONY BY TRACYE FORTIN
of Educare Central Maine**

Tuesday, February 21, 2023, state House Room 228

In Support of LD 258, “An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025”.

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Baldacci, Representative Myer, members of the Health and Human Services.

I’m Tracye Fortin, Chief Operating Officer of Kennebec Valley Community Action Program, Child & Family Services. I oversee our Head Start and child care program model at Educare Central Maine and community partnership models with public schools and center and family child care providers.

Our communities, our state and our country realize now more than ever before that childcare access and quality are paramount to a healthy economy. This was highlighted with the pandemic. This has been known to the early childhood field for years from research-based evidence, and certainly came to light - brightly - since COVID-19, for business leaders, public educators, government officials, families and children. Child care is the workforce behind the workforce.

Since research informed us of children’s brain development, with the greatest synopsis for learning capacity initiated prior to age three, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the long-term impact on children’s development and social-emotional well-being, and intensive parent engagement for a whole family approach for positive and lasting outcomes, early childhood programs have continued to advocate for supports to increase childcare quality and access, recognizing that it takes a village.

That is why you will hear various legislation this session to continue to make improvements on behalf of the child care workforce, beginning with increasing the allocation of the child care educator salary supplement. Stipends contained in LD258 are both recognized and appreciated as a start to increase child care worker wages. Continuing to build upon this as a baseline effort is the right step forward as Maine continues to build a system to advance high quality early care and education in Maine. We must attract and retain quality educators in the early childhood field.

Educare's turnover rate tripled during the pandemic when we are historically below 10%. Our community efforts with higher education, Career & Technical Centers, Department of Education, AmeriCorps, Apprenticeship, and a Parent Substitute Training Program take focused time to cultivate in order to yield an increased candidate pool. Like other child care programs, we continue to be challenged with full staffing when a public school educator with comparable degree/certification earns at least 20% more in their annual salary. Likewise, the wage comparability of service sector positions are competition as well, leaving potential workers to leave, or not enter, the early childhood field.

I urge you to support investing in Maine's movement forward, joining in the significant systems partnerships that are established and ready to be strengthened and expanded with LD 258 and other child care related bills during this legislative session.

Thank you for your time.

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