



Testimony of Rita Furlow,
Senior Policy Analyst, Maine Children's Alliance
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
LD 258
Health & Human Services Portion of State Biennial Budget
February 21, 2023

Senator Rotundo, Senator Baldacci, Representative Sachs, Representative Meyers, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, my name is Rita Furlow. I am the Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance. I offer testimony today in support of provisions in the proposed biennial budget that advance the health and well-being of Maine children and families. The Maine Children's Alliance, a statewide non-partisan, advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policy and best practices to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in Maine.

Because the brain's architecture is built over time, and from the bottom up, ensuring a strong foundation early in life is critical to everything that follows. Strong foundations are built by making sure young children have positive learning experiences and stable, consistent relationships with caring adults at home and in the community. Today, with over 70%ⁱ of Maine children under age six having all resident parents in the workforce, it is crucial to make sure Maine's investments in early childhood reflect the science of what children need, while also accommodating Maine families as they raise the generation that will lead Maine into the future.

Child Care. We know that over 69 percent of Maine children under the age of six have both parents in the workforce.¹ Parents require child care to go to work. Yet the high cost of child care makes it difficult for many Maine families to make ends meet. Families pay "tuition" for

¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, Children under age 6 with all available parents in work force (5-yr averages) in Maine, retrieved from <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7317-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-work-force>

their children to attend child care. The cost of tuition for an infant is similar in annual cost to tuition at the University of Maine.²

This budget supports the child care system in Maine by providing working parents with support through the child care subsidy system, enabling them to be employed while helping to pay for child care. Maine's support of child care allows the state to receive millions of dollars in federal matching funds, which also supports the entire child care system. The inspection and licensing of child care facilities throughout the state is supported with these funds, including background checks and professional development to assist all child care providers.

We are pleased to see the continuation in the Governor's budget of a new initiative from 2022 that utilizes state dollars to provide wage supports to early childhood educators. This initiative, which provides a \$200 a month wage support to staff, has been a critical to helping to stabilize the child care industry. We thank the Governor for her leadership on this issue and ask that you consider additional funding to increase these stipends to ensure retention of existing staff and to grow the child care workforce.

Unfortunately, the low wages of early educators make it difficult for those running child care programs to attract staff. We hear of classrooms sitting empty while parents sit on waiting lists unable to find child care. The central problem of child care in our state and country is the low wages paid to mostly women who can't afford to take these jobs.

Head Start. The Head Start program provides early care and education to some of the poorest and most at-risk children in Maine. Head Start also enhances children's health, nutrition, and mental health while supporting and educating their parents. Providing funding for Head Start is a good investment for Maine's most vulnerable children. Unfortunately, Head Start is not immune when it comes finding and retaining staff. We urge you to consider additional state funding to give Head Start additional flexibility to provide higher wages for staff and to provide continuity of care for children whose parent's income may result in their child no longer being eligible for Head Start.

First Four for ME is a proposal to scale up a model of early childhood service delivery that has been successful in local communities across the country, including here in Maine in Somerset County. It also helps prevent the financial destabilization of the early childhood system when state or communities create or expand public pre-K. We look forward to seeing the unfolding of this program from the administration over the coming months and years.

² Price of Child Care in Maine. Child Care Aware https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2019%20Price%20of%20Care%20State%20Sheets/Maine.pdf?utm_campaign=2019%20Cost%20of%20Care&utm_source=2019%20COC%20-%20ME

Mental Health. We applaud the Governor’s investment in additional funding to provide rate increases to bolster the behavioral health system. These investments can bolster the behavioral health system to increase supports for parents experiencing challenges to safety and stability, including unmet mental health needs and substance use disorder. We also strongly support the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership program as a way support for the mental health needs of young children and a support to the educators and parents who are in caring relationships with those children.

Resource Families and Children. We also appreciate the provisions in the state budget to increase rates for resource families to support the care of children in state custody.

We are pleased that the Governor’s budget continues to highlight the importance of investing in systems and services that support the well-being of Maine children and families. Wage supplements for early educators, expanded public pre-school, maintaining the state’s share of public-school funding, and universal free school meals help ensure that young children have a strong foundation for learning and healthy development. For families challenged with behavioral health needs or substance use disorder, ensuring supportive services are available and accessible is critical to child safety and family well-being.

Thank you for your consideration.

¹The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, Children under age 6 with all available parents in work force (5-yr averages) in Maine, retrieved from: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7317-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-work-force-5-yr-averages?loc=21&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/any/14380,14381>