

Testimony of Heather Wargo
In support of
***LD 1726: An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families
sponsored by Senate President Troy Jackson***

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Heather Wargo. I am a Family Services Coordinator at a Head Start, and I live in Fairfield. I'm testifying in support of LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care and Working Families.

I support raising child care educator wages because this is the work force that supports our work force in all communities. Families with children cannot work if they do not have reliable child care. Child care educators are such an under paid profession. Many times we have very talented teachers leave for jobs that pay higher, but do not require the training and education that teaching in early childhood education does. Many of our teachers have bachelors degrees or masters degrees, but are sometimes paid less than other jobs that require no education beyond a high school diploma.

I support Maine developing a cost model tool that better supports our understanding of what it costs to provide quality care and education because for small child care programs and privately owned programs, the cost of providing the service is big. Than is why teachers pay suffers when a child care is running the numbers of cost vs. price of care. Families cannot afford to pay more for care and child care programs need to pay the expenses related to running the business. I think this will be a helpful tool when looking at the big picture of how child care programs are cutting expenses as best as they can and some are just not able to survive.

I support raising subsidy eligibility for Maine's lower income families because the subsidy eligibility was written in a different economy. Families are struggling because wages increases because of the raise of minimum wage. This has made less families eligible for a child care subsidy. The piece that was not factored in was, inflation and the increase cost of housing. Families are struggling to pay for basic needs, but are not eligible for assistance with child care.

I support child care reimbursement when children are absent because as and educator who ran their own child care, I know that the expense of running the business does not end just because a child is absent for a day or even a week. You still have to pay staff and maintain the building even if a child is absent so that everything is in place when the child returns.

Maine needs to come up with a long term plan to increase the investment in child care while increasing the subsidy eligibility because this is what will keep our economy going. Many of our families who work in our service industries have children and need reliable and quality child care options. These are the people that make minimum wage that are barley making ends meet. The increased cost of housing, food, gas, heating oil and other basic needs have put a real strain on these families. Now they are not eligible for child care subsidy because they are making a little more in their paycheck that is not even coving their basic needs. The next concern is that a lot of these families will be looing their Maine Care benefits soon as well.

I support increasing Head Start eligibility because families are struggling. The wages have gone up, but so has the cost of living. Many of the families that have been Head Start eligible in the past, are no longer eligible because they are making just a little over the requirements. These are the families who are also struggling to find affordable housing, and have food insecurities and are worried about paying for basic needs. I see this a great deal in my work as a family services coordinator. Families have to choose between paying their bills for basic needs and providing quality child care and early education for their children.

I support providing funding to pay or child care for child care employees because a lot of our teachers who teach in our program are living in poverty because of the low wages paid to them for the work they do. Many of our teachers cannot afford to send their children to the same quality program that they work for because they make just a little over the requirements for Head Start or the child care subsidy. This is another reason we loose good teachers. They struggle with the balance of keeping the teaching job they love, or staying home with their children because quality child care is not an option for them.

I support shortened time periods for determining subsidy eligibility because most families need a subsidy when they apply. Shortening the wait time to get the subsidy would enable them to get the care they need for their child and get them to work sooner.

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