

Testimony of Anne Soto
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 Anne Soto. I am the Executive Director of the Children's Center, and I live in Portland. 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 early childhood education is a crucial component of our country's infrastructure, as the pandemic unfortunately highlighted when many families struggled to find suitable care for their children. The demand for highly qualified programs and educators remains high, yet many face financial challenges. Despite holding a Master's in Education, I struggle to pay back my loans on the salary of an early childhood educator, despite being highly qualified. I have also heard from numerous families about the importance of consistent staffing, as high turnover can negatively impact children's education. However, as a center, we struggle to provide that consistency due to the financial challenges faced by many educators in this field.

A better understanding of the true cost of providing quality childcare and education would help us realize why tuition rates are so high or why government supplements are necessary. For too long, the early childhood education sector has operated at the expense of its workforce, with long hours, minimal benefits, and low wages. At the same time, families are charged more than they can afford for these essential services. This system is broken, and we need to identify the areas that need urgent change. By comprehending the actual cost of childcare, we can take an essential step towards understanding where the system is flawed and work towards finding sustainable solutions.

I support raising subsidy eligibility for Maine's lower income families because through my personal experience, I have come to realize the significant gap between subsidy eligibility and the actual cost of early childcare. The exorbitant tuition fees often deny many families the opportunity to access quality childcare services. For instance, my family missed the eligibility cutoff by a mere \$100, resulting in our monthly childcare expenses skyrocketing from \$400 to \$1300. This extreme increase in cost made it challenging for us to afford basic necessities like groceries, even though my husband and I worked in the childcare industry. It is imperative that we do better in supporting working families to access the affordable childcare they need to sustain their livelihoods.

I support ensuring that subsidy reimbursement covers days when children are absent from their program because childcare centers operate on extremely tight margins and rely heavily on full tuition payments for all available spots. When a child is absent for a day, we lose out on essential tuition revenue necessary to sustain our operations. Although the child may not use the spot on that day, we cannot sell a single day's care without prior notice, such as when a child unexpectedly stays home due to illness.

Investing in child care programs and expanding subsidy eligibility can benefit individuals and society. It can provide children with a strong educational foundation, help working families, and boost economic growth. Developing a long-term plan to increase investments in child care programs and subsidy eligibility is crucial for a more prosperous and equitable society.

I support increasing Head Start eligibility and funding because Head Start is a vital program that provides a range of essential services to low-income children and their families. By supporting Head Start, we can help level the playing field for these children and promote a more equitable society. It's time to give this program the financial backing it deserves, so it can continue to provide critical care to the families who need it most.

I support providing funding to pay for child care for child care employees because it is unsustainable to keep shifting the burden of providing quality childcare onto working families. The cost of childcare has reached a point where it is often more expensive than attending college, yet employees are still paid little more than minimum wage. This is an untenable situation that does not work for either educators or families.

I support shortened time periods for determining subsidy eligibility because the uncertainty surrounding eligibility for childcare subsidies significantly impacts families' choices in deciding where to send their children for care. This creates unnecessary stress for young families seeking to secure childcare services so they can re-enter the workforce and continue contributing to society.

I support shortened time periods for child care programs receiving subsidy reimbursement because running a business and providing care becomes very challenging when payments are unpredictable.

Please vote in support of LD 1726,
Anne Soto