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FOR HEALTHY LIVING
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Testimony of Whitney Files before
the Committee on Health and Human Services
in support of

**LD 1726: An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care
for Working Families**

May 10, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Whitney Files and I am the CEO of the Penobscot Bay YMCA. I support LD 1726: *An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families*.

Collectively, the 15 YMCAs in Maine are the largest childcare providers in the state. We serve thousands of children in our early childhood education programs, before/after school programs, and summer camp. These programs provide children with safe, nurturing and enriching care, and are a critical component of our state's infrastructure to support working parents and our economy.

There are a couple components of this bill in particular that I want to highlight as impactful for my YMCA.

- 1) Improvements to the childcare subsidy program:** The shift from attendance-based to enrollment-based reimbursement for childcare subsidy is an important step in making this critical program work for families and providers. Enrollment-based reimbursement is a more stable and sustainable funding mechanism for providers, meaning we will be better equipped to meet the needs of our communities. We also support policies that allow more families in need to access this support.

As responsible childcare providers, we must recruit, train and retain the appropriate number of qualified staff to maintain proper program ratios. When a child in need of subsidy is enrolled in our program, we must prepare and staff the program for that child regardless of whether or not the child is absent due to illness or other conflicts. When reimbursement is based on attendance and not on enrollment, we risk losing subsidy payments to cover our costs when a family or child is going through a period of sickness or instability.

- 2) Doubling the monthly wage supplement for all childcare workers** is a critical investment in our most important asset – the skilled early educators that teach our state's children and allow us to offer consistent care for working families. Recruiting and retaining qualified staff has been an incredible challenge for us, and impacts the number of children we can serve.

Despite raising our base wages for lead and assistant teachers in 2022, we are still struggling to recruit and retain qualified educators. The \$200/educator/month salary

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supplement has been an important mechanism for retaining staff, but it is not enough. Many of our childcare staff are parents who are struggling with inflation and escalating costs for necessities. We know that we need to pay staff more, however, when we raise staff wages, we must pass along those costs to our childcare families. Many of our working families struggle to cover the current high cost of childcare, and further increases are very difficult to absorb. State-funded salary supplements are a critical way to provide better compensation for caring, qualified educators, while ensuring that childcare programs do not need to pass the wage increases along to families.

*For every preschool teacher employed at the Y, there are 10 parents who are able to join our local workforce and contribute to the economy. **Childcare workers are the workforce behind the workforce.** Yet, many programs, including our own Y, are struggling to expand our programs due to a lack of funding and the need for qualified staff. Without expanded access to care, many parents and families have no option but to stay at home with their young children rather than rejoin the workforce. We need to provide higher wages to childcare workers in order to expand childcare, rebuild our economy and fix a system that faces collapse.*

Our Y is working hard to partner with local school districts and to fundraise locally so that we can open additional classrooms and serve more children. We are currently being considered for a state grant to open a new infant center. We are grateful for that opportunity because the need for care is acute. Every week, our Y speaks with desperate parents who need childcare and cannot find placement. We hear the panic as pregnant couples in their third trimester call to join the waitlist, only to learn that their child won't be likely to secure a spot in our program until they are almost two years old. "How will I be able to go back to work?" is a frequent and concerning theme. Some parents in our area know to join the childcare waitlist as soon as they are pregnant. As a result, our childcare directors often know that a couple is expecting a baby months before they share that joyful news with their own parents and family members. This should not be the new normal.

Here at the Y, we have an incredible group of hard-working staff who love the kids in their care. Thank you for your consideration of this bill to increase the monthly wage supplement for Maine's highly deserving childcare staff.

Respectfully submitted,

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