



**Testimony of Sue Powers
In support of LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting
Child Care and Working Families**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Sue Powers and I am an early childhood education and Whole Family Approach consultant with Maine Community Action Partnership. In my role, I work in partnership with the Maine Head Start Directors Association and Community Action Networks in Maine to improve the quality and conditions that support increased outcomes for social and economic mobility of Maine families, leading to their future success. I'm testifying in support of LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care and Working Families.

There are so many components of LD 1726 that promote building a system to support families, children, parents, and early childhood educators. In this testimony, I will choose a few I feel most impactful in bringing strength, showing value and professionalizing a system that has been broken and struggling for decades.

Early Childhood Education is the foundation of our educational system and the very place where impressions are formed that will influence values for lifelong learning. Early Childhood Educators are just that, teachers and educators every bit as valuable as a teacher or educator in our K-12 systems. Understanding the impact these early educators have on the future success of our children, let us value them in compensation equal to their counterparts in the public K-12 system. Raising the compensation for our birth – 5 educators shows value for the important role they play in the development of our children's future. Using one Aroostook provider example, a certified bachelor level early childhood educator starts at \$800/week and the same certified teacher in the public-school system starts at \$975, a difference of \$9,000 annually. This provider is paying in the upper salary range for the county. For many providers this gap is more. How is this equitable and how can this disparity encourage young professionals to enter the early childhood education system?

Every day early childhood educators leave the field for various reasons related to compensation, benefits and often because they cannot find affordable child care for their own children. Think of how hard it is to go to work every day in a profession that pays you substandard wages and then to have to pay market rate child care for your own children. LD 1726 supports child care subsidy funding for child care employees. This subsidy provides an additional benefit to employees in the early education profession to access child care, removing it as a barrier to staying in the field. Over the last year, a child care provider in Aroostook had four teachers resign to go to work for another provider that offered them reduced child care fees as a benefit. This employee benefit made the difference for these educators to be able to make ends meet at the end of the month.

The current payment structure for child care subsidy and reimbursement is based on a market rate system that reflects what the county market can bear, which is much less than the actual cost of providing the care. This system requires businesses to reduce ratio and enrollment, cut corners on quality and in total make business decisions based on economic factors rather than on what is best for children and families, all in an effort to keep the doors open. Instilling a Cost of Care model would look at the true cost of providing quality services to families and reimburse

providers based on that cost. Effects of this model has potential to increase enrolment opportunities and increase quality services provided. This model as well as the practice of reimbursing providers based on enrollment rather than attendance, supports providers to be able to operate a business knowing what the weekly/monthly income will be. Expecting child care providers to not receive reimbursement when children are absent is another discrepancy that sets the early childhood system apart from public school. Our public-school counterparts do not expect to go without revenue when children are absent, so why would we have a system for early childhood providers that has such an expectation. It is important to keep the enrollment vs attendance reimbursement system in place.

Access to quality child care is a service that we would hope to be available to more low to middle income families in Maine. Increasing the subsidy eligibility from 85% to 125% of median income would open up enrollment opportunities for more Maine families to access child care. This supports Maine's long-term plan that by 2030, child care costs for families would be limited to no more than 7% of their income when family earn up to 250% of state median income. This plan would put more money in the pockets of families to support essential needs related to increased costs of food, fuel, transportation and housing.

Lastly, being able to expand the comprehensive services offered by Head Start to reach more children and families living in difficult and complex living situations would make a significant difference in supporting families to reach social and economic mobility and children to reach school readiness. Currently federal Head Start income guidelines use the 1965 based Federal Poverty Level to determine eligibility. Eligibility remains at 100% of the FPL even as minimum wage has increased and the definition of living in poverty has changed. Many families are barely getting by with jobs well above the FPL and as such, are not eligible for Head Start. Increasing the funding for state Head Start eligibility to 185% of FPL would align with other program eligibility like WIC and Maine Care. This increased eligibility would allow families making above 100% poverty, but experiencing addiction, domestic violence, disabilities, housing instability to access Head Start for their children. This increase in income eligibility would open access to public school partnership and child care partnerships to enroll children and families needing comprehensive services and support to make sure their children are ready for K. It would also better secure continued Head Start enrollment for children moving from Early Head Start to Head Start continued services if their families now make more than they did three years ago at initial eligibility for EHS enrollment. Last year in Maine this number accounted for approximately 30 children, not able to continue in HS due to their family's economic condition improving. These children need the continued service Head Start offers to prevent a break-in-service between Early Head Start and when enrollment in the public pre-k system is available. Head Start is the program that supports eligible 3-year olds in school readiness outcomes when other public pre-k is not available. Raising income guidelines for these vulnerable families and children is the right thing to do.

Thank you for your time and your support for LD 1726. This legislation is a lifeline for families as they work to improve the economic conditions that impact them daily. When families do better, children do better. For the future of Maine, please support them to achieve a sustainable life.

Sincerely,

Sue Powers,
MeCAP and MHSDA