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Testimony of Tina Jennings 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 10th, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Tina Jennings and I'm the Association Director of Community & Youth Engagement at the YMCA of Auburn-Lewiston. 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 provider in the state. We serve thousands of children in our early childhood education programs, before/afterschool 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.

It is not the childcare provider's fault when a child on subsidy is absent, yet we bear the financial burden of absenteeism. This reality makes it difficult to sustain programming when we experience unplanned losses, and frankly we have considered reducing the number of slots we make available to families on subsidy. It pains us to even consider this, since it runs contrary to our mission; however, we have to balance our budget just like any business. In our community, the need for subsidized childcare slots is huge, and we strongly desire to keep serving those families in our community. This program must make more financial and administrative sense for providers to make it more available to families that need it.

- 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.

Increasing the wage supplement will be instrumental in retaining the childcare workforce. In a time where GOOD staff are leaving the field to work in jobs that require much less mental and physical commitment, we need help. Staff are going to fast food jobs, box store retail, etc. and making more than we can offer them. It has been extremely difficult to hire and retain any staff, never mind qualified staff that care about children, children's development and working with family units as whole. Please help us to keep staff in the field and to make this field more appealing to others.

Working with children is hard work, ensuring they are ready to enter elementary school and are meeting their developmental milestones is hard work. Early Childhood Educators should be appropriately compensated for this important and skilled work!

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