



Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the joint standing committee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the chance to testify in support of LD 1726. My name is Cate Blackford and I am the public policy director for the Maine People's Alliance. MPA is Maine's largest community action organization with over 32,000 members stretching from Kittery to Fort Kent. MPA believes everyone should have what they need, contribute what they can, and no one should be left behind. I also have the pleasure of serving on the board of the Islesboro Preschool and am a parent of two children who went through daycare, preschool and preK.

I am here today in support of LD 1726 because this bill not only takes significant practical steps to improve our existing child care and early learning system but also lays a path towards making Maine a state where every child has access to high quality, accessible, affordable child care.

We all need quality, accessible child care. Not just parents and children. Early childhood education and care is the essential foundation for our children's ability to thrive in school and beyond, for employers who are struggling to find and keep great staff because they don't have adequate care for their children, and for all of us who rely on those employers, our communities' businesses and services, to get through our day to day. If we want our communities to function now and the next generation to succeed, we all need quality, accessible childcare.

That is why the pathway that LD 1726 lays out to achieve the long-term vision of affordable, accessible, quality care in every community is so important. The cost of care modeling, the administrative improvements, the higher income eligibility, and increasing stipends for providers are all important steps that we know we must take as part of carving that pathway.

We cannot create the system we need without ensuring the salaries of providers are commensurate with the value of early childhood education and care in our communities, and at a minimum, high enough to attract and retain the educators we desperately need. We also must get to the place where parents aren't foregoing work or other basic needs or going into debt to cover the cost of child care. The planning work in the bill for how we get to a future where no family pays more than 7% of their income on child care, based on a true cost of quality care is equally essential.

In fact, one of the most transformational aspects of this bill is the creation of a cost of care estimator. We cannot improve access to quality child care and make it affordable without first understanding the many ways today's market rate system relies on low wages, few to

nonexistent benefits, insufficient availability and long travel times for parents and educators in rural communities.

The bill's improvements to the administration of the child care subsidy program, including improving enrollment and payment processing so it is both accurate and seamless for both parents and providers; promotion, especially to marginalized and underserved groups; and an integrated data system with regular reports to multiple oversight bodies are all critical foundations for the longer-term planning and will both help improve the program today and inform the plan for a future system. We ask you to support them as well.

Even today, we uphold racial hierarchies and gender disparities in how we value work. We continue to reinforce systemic racism, sexism and economic inequality in our ideas about who gets to do what work and how much they should earn. Upholding these old, deeply embedded ideas prevents us from having the child care and early learning that would benefit us all.

Take the example of the tenured professor versus the child care provider. The professor has historically been seen as a “man” of learning, who is engaged in rational explorations of science, history, and philosophy. The day care provider is stereotypically seen as a low-skilled woman doing work that could be done by any woman at home, for free. And that history, those stereotypes, have a huge impact on how both positions are paid.

According to the American Association of University Professors, in 2022 male tenured professors earned 150,000/year on average and female professors earned 130,000/year. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median wage of a childcare worker in this country is \$13.22 an hour. The male professor earns 5.5x that of the child care worker. Even as those learned institutions put out more and more research on the incredible importance of early learning and care.

Can you imagine the effects if we valued early childhood educators at even half of what we paid professors? Recruitment and retention would shift dramatically. We would significantly increase the value people place on the education and training needed to excel in supporting our youngest children, increasing demand and its availability. There would be widespread economic growth from having so many people earning a living wage in jobs that by their very nature are tied to the local community. We would see significant impacts on our children's emotional, social and educational development and their readiness for school and life. There would be significant cost savings and impacts from early detection of challenges kids are facing because they have access to high quality early learning. Parents and caregivers could fully participate in the workforce without making tough tradeoffs between basic necessities. And that's just the beginning. Imagine what is possible if every child in Maine had a rich system of supports from a very early age. Imagine what is possible if we abandon old ideas about how much value to place on early childhood education and learning and the people who do that indispensable work. Imagine the return on such an investment in our children and our communities.

I urge you to support both the immediate next steps in this bill and the long-term planning, to help us take a major step forward toward realizing those benefits for us all.

Thank you for your time.