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Testimony in Support of LD 2197-An Act to Strengthen the Health, Well-being, and Academic Success of Children and Their Families Through Increased Community Support of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
February 20, 2024

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

I am Quincy Hentzel, President and CEO of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce. We represent 1,300 businesses in our region who employ over 75,000 Mainers. We are submitting this written testimony today to express our organization's strongest support for LD 2197.

This legislation will help facilitate the renovation of the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine's 100-year-old club in Portland, and the construction of their proposed *Bridge to Success* Teen Center nearby. The *Bridge to Success* Program is directly responsive to both the established workforce development and racial equity goals of the Portland Regional Chamber and the needs of the community at-large. This program will bring world class programming, mentoring space, and a career exploration lab to the over 2,000 member youth enrolled in the BGCSM's current programming. This represents an unparalleled training and mentoring opportunity not only to the children in the immediate area, but to those enrolled in BCGM throughout Southern Maine.

In 2020, we undertook a multiyear Portland business community racial equity strategic plan. That plan comprises of four pillars, which after extensive rounds of community engagement represented the largest gaps in the business community's ongoing efforts to realize a more equitable workplace in Greater Portland. One of those four pillars is improving the school to workforce pipeline for BIPOC youth in Maine to ensure they reach their highest career potential and to keep their knowledge and vitality within our communities. That work is only made possible through innovative programming, like *Bridge to Success*, from trusted community organizations, like the BGCSM, who have deep roots in shaping the lives of BIPOC and other historically disadvantaged youth.

The Legislature, and this committee, know well the significant and structural workforce shortages we face in key industries over the next decade. Progress on closing that gap will only happen through increased investments in career training and exploration programming like *Bridge to Success*. While the state has made significant investments in our community college system and adult workforce training, there are still too few programs available to capture the attention of youth before critical life events in young adulthood steer them away from Maine and the industries we desperately need more workers in. We are confident that the up-front investment in LD 2197 will realize out-sized return as young Mainers identify careers of interest and prioritize training for those professions from a young age.

We thank you for your time and commitment to all Mainers, and we ask for your expeditious approval of this important legislation.