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Testimony in Opposition to LD 2214-An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

Childcare Initiatives (Languages Part SS and TT)

Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
February 26, 2024

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Committee on Appropriations,

I am Eamonn Dundon, the Director of Advocacy 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 strong opposition to several of the childcare initiatives in LD 2214 that would have the state take a step backwards on this critical issue at a time when we can least afford it. Employee access to childcare has quickly emerged as the second most pressing issue facing our members behind our housing shortage.

Last year we joined a diverse coalition of organizations and individuals to pass landmark childcare legislation that took massive steps forward on pay for childcare professionals and costs for working families. We were proud to stand with others from around the state in support of LD 1726 because we knew that our economic and workforce development goals in Maine could not be achieved without access to high-quality and affordable childcare options for working parents. That legislation was eventually included in our current biennial budget, and the language provisions contained within it make those commitments the law in our state. Unfortunately, the childcare provisions in LD 2214 would see us take a step back on those commitments in violation of the Legislature's intent when passing the biennial budget last year.

Specifically, our hope is that this committee vote ought not to pass on Language Parts SS and TT and the total \$11.8MM in deappropriations for childcare services found on page A-52 of the budget. Over the last year the childcare landscape has gotten worse, not better. We have seen persistent workforce shortages in the industry, programs limiting their capacity, and, most troubling, the closing of programs throughout the state. It is incredibly concerning that the administration sees fit to reduce resources in this time of crisis. It is already incredibly difficult to recruit and retain professionals in Maine's workforce due to our challenging housing market, and that is only made harder with our relative dearth of childcare slots.

In their testimony introducing this budget proposal last week the Administration noted that the Governor's proposal "builds on the commitments of the current year's budget" and "funds the commitments made in bipartisan budgets in the last few years". Nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to these provisions which were supported 33-1 in the Senate and unanimously in the House when LD 1726 passed through both chambers last year and was subsequently fully funded in our current fiscal year budget.

The current childcare system is not working for anyone. Parents find the cost of care increasingly out of reach, causing some to leave the workforce altogether. Providers and their employees are stretched thin with near poverty wages and high rates of burnout that have hollowed out an industry of experienced professionals. Employers are consistently facing disruptions in their workforce given the unpredictability of childcare availability. The Legislature was right to act last year when you made these critical investments. Please do not retreat from that commitment now and vote ought not to pass on these damaging proposed cuts.