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

Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Public Hearing: February 26, 2024

Senators Rotundo and Baldacci, Representatives Sachs and Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, my name is Dee Kerry, I am the Executive Director of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and a resident of Portland. The testimony I am presenting today is on behalf of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics – an association representing the pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists in Maine.

Pediatricians support their patients, and ultimately the families, through the myriad of challenges they face in daily life, not just specific to their health. Families, particularly those on MaineCare, often have challenges with housing, affording clothing, meeting heating and other utility costs, and providing nutritious food for their families. What has become very common and completely unacceptable in this day and age is for families to not have access to child care. Making ends meet on one salary is nearly impossible for a vast majority of Maine families.

For this reason, we ask that you **reject the following child care initiatives** in the budget and prioritize this critical need for families to have access to qualified child care workers so they can work to support their families and feel confident their children are properly cared for.

We ask that you reject:

-Reducing funding by recognizing one-time General Fund savings for monthly wage supplements for all child care workers due to the October 25, 2023 effective date of Public Law 2023, chapter 412. It is imperative that funding allocated to the child care wage supplement program be carried through to ensure full implementation for the remainder of the fiscal year as early childhood educators continue to improve their on their professional development and achieve higher paying tiers. If this funding is reduced, there is a risk of having to lower the wage tiers hurting child care educator's paychecks.

-Reducing funding on a one-time basis due to the delayed implementation of changes to income eligibility for child care subsidies in the Child Care Affordability Program enacted in Public Law 2023, chapter 412, Part VVV. Families were promised this expansion would begin on January 1st, 2024 through the law passed by this legislature and again in a press release issued by the Governor. To backtrack on the progress of this initiative is ignoring the continued challenges families face in affording and accessing child care and is mute to the ongoing child care crisis in your communities.

-Reducing funding by recognizing one-time savings for child care staff in the Maine Child Care Affordability Program due to delaying implementation until fiscal year 2024-25. Child care programs and educators have been anticipating the start of this program as intended in law and NOT a time limited, piloted program. Delaying this program results in additional child care educators leaving the field. The Legislature did the hard work to ensure this recruitment and retention strategy to build back the child care educator workforce and the proposal to delay in the budget sends a message that educators needs go unheard.

If Maine is to make good on a promise the Legislature made to address the child care crisis, then please reject these initiatives and send the message that we will move forward as a state and attend to the needs of young children, their families, and this incredible workforce.

Thank you for prioritizing Maine children and their families who are in desperate need of reliable child care.