

Written Testimony of Pete Plummer, Chief Operating Officer

LD 210 An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Joint Standing Committees on Appropriation and Financial Affairs Committee & Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

February 7, 2025

Thank you, Senator Rotondo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs.

I am the Chief Operating Officer for Woodfords Family Services. Woodfords is a nonprofit social service agency with a central office in Westbrook, Maine that provides services in communities across the state. This testimony focuses on our three Pre-K (ages 3-5) programs, which are located in Westbrook, Waterville, and on the Pineland Campus in New Gloucester. During my 21-year tenure at Woodfords, the agency has always provided services to preschool-aged children with developmental disabilities referred by Child Development Services (CDS). This testimony is intended to share some history and develop a shared understanding of how we got here.

Early intervention has always been at the heart of Woodfords mission. We were founded as a school in 1967, and have maintained a commitment to delivering this essential service to some of Maine's most vulnerable children for nearly 60 years, despite the financial challenges it has posed. In the early 1980s, Woodfords operated just one Pre-K program for a small number of children. Rise in demand for services led the agency to expand over time.

While other programs closed, Woodfords not only found a way to remain open, but expanded by taking on children who were at risk of losing services when their programs could no longer bear the losses. In the last 15 years, these programs have included the May Center in Freeport, the CDS-led Reach School in Topsham, and Easter Seals in Portland. Additionally, Woodfords has demonstrated a passionate commitment to this population of children by expanding our reach in areas such as Waterville, where we have facilities and provide other disability services.

At our peak, we supported more than 100 Pre-K kids per day. These programs routinely operated at a deficit, but Woodfords was able to support the deficits with grants and small surpluses generated by other programs. As MaineCare rate increases were limited and CDS payments for kids without MaineCare fell short of MaineCare rates, losses in the hundreds of thousands of dollars rendered the programs unsustainable. These Pre-K special needs programs found themselves competing with K-12 special needs private schools for staff, but the K-12 programs were receiving tuition payments, while the Pre-K programs were not.

Woodfords began talking in earnest with CDS about the continuing financial losses and the unfair competition with K-12 in April of 2019. We sent letters to the Commissioners of MaineCare and DHHS. This led to more meetings with CDS, whose response was that CDS did not have the funding to pay tuition. These communications culminated in a final letter to the Commissioners that, absent any change, in order to avoid jeopardizing the entire agency's financial viability, Woodfords planned to phase out our longstanding Pre-K program effective in the 2023 School year.

With this in mind, we pivoted to a plan under which we would stop accepting referrals to all three Pre-K programs and maintain the children we had through their graduation to public Kindergarten, while no

longer accepting new referrals. This created room for the creation of a K-5 grade program accepting referrals to public schools, which paid tuition. This allowed Woodfords to maintain our mission of caring for children with special needs in a program that had financial sustainability through tuition reimbursement.

This decision to replace open Pre-K slots with K-5 students resulted in our Pre-K census plummeting from more than 100 to fewer than 30 in a short span of time. At the same time, the Pre-K referral list from CDS to Woodfords grew to well over 100 children. The need for this service was clearly there, unfortunately, the funding was not.

Thankfully, the legislature and the current administration approved and funded tuition reimbursement for Pre-K services in 2024. Since receiving these payments, Woodfords has grown the Pre-K program back to a current census of 55. While this is nowhere near the 100+ Pre-K children we had many years ago, we have worked hard to maintain our commitment to open slots if sustainable funding is available.

To reinvest in the growth of the Pre-K program and take children off the CDS wait list, Woodfords and all providers need a commitment from the legislature that tuition reimbursement is here to stay. The only alternative Woodfords can envision if the Pre-K tuition model is not continued is to close our current programs. Woodfords' staff care deeply about early intervention and the lifelong impact it has on the ability of young children with developmental disabilities to reach their greatest potential. Without the legislature's commitment to ongoing tuition payments, Woodfords will be forced to close our Pre-K program this year, depriving these children of access the same services as their K-12 counterparts.

Please help us keep these programs open by continuing the current legislative commitment of funding tuition reimbursement for Pre-K programs.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I wish I could have attended the public hearing in person, but I hope sharing this history is helpful in your deliberations.

Respectfully Submitted,

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