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Testimony of Meaghan Woodsome before  
the Committee On Appropriations and Financial Affairs and  
the Committee on Health and Human Services  
in opposition to  
**LD 210, the Governor's proposed Biennial Budget**  
February 24, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished committee members, I'm Meaghan Woodsome, Chief Administrative Officer of the YMCA of Southern Maine. We serve families from Biddeford, Portland, Freeport and everywhere in between. I stand before you deeply concerned about the proposed elimination of the Childcare Employment Award program and the 50% reduction in Childcare Worker Stipends.

These programs are brave, forward-thinking investments in Maine's future, and most importantly, they're working. The salary stipends helped us overcome a critical staffing crisis that was limiting our ability to provide desperately needed childcare to working Maine parents. Despite raising our teacher starting rates by 34% and director rates by 22% over three years, we still struggled to maintain the qualified staff needed to keep classrooms open. The stipends changed that equation dramatically. Our preschool director was able to leave a higher-paying job to work at the YMCA because of the childcare salary stipend. With her leadership, and a stable workforce, we're now planning for expansion – adding an additional classroom – to serve more families. This is just one example of how these investments directly translate into better care for Maine's children and working parents.

In my role overseeing staff recruitment and retention, I've witnessed firsthand the painful irony that many talented potential educators cannot afford to work in childcare because they cannot afford childcare for their own children. The Childcare Employment Award program offered hope of breaking this cycle. The fact that this program exhausted its funding just months after launch speaks volumes about the desperate need for this support in our industry.

Maine cannot afford to step backward. During the COVID-19 pandemic, almost half of our state's childcare providers closed their doors. Today, the lack of childcare costs Maine's economy an estimated \$403 million annually as parents are forced to reduce hours, change jobs, or leave the workforce entirely. Meanwhile, our children miss out on programs that support healthy brain development and prepare them to be Maine's future workforce.

As a nonprofit organization committed to strengthening our community, we work hard to balance fair compensation for our educators with keeping childcare affordable for families. The reality is that early childhood education requires sophisticated skills – our teachers must understand child development, create engaging curricula, maintain safety protocols, and nurture social-emotional growth. We're asking highly qualified professionals to take on incredibly complex work. The Childcare Worker Stipends and Employment Award Program help bridge the gap between what families can afford to pay and what educators deserve to earn.

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I urge you to oppose these cuts and maintain Maine's investment in early childhood educators. These programs are already paying dividends by stabilizing our workforce and supporting working families. This isn't just about childcare - it's about Maine's economic future.

Thank you for your time.