

February 10, 2025

Testimony in Opposition to LD 210: An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government 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

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Sarah Lavallee. I am the Head Start Director for Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) serving Northern Kennebec and Somerset Counties and Educare Central Maine in Waterville, and I live in Vassalboro.

I oppose the proposed budget cuts that will impact the field of Early Care and Education and the thousands of children and families served each day. I have worked in this field since I graduated from the University of Maine with my Bachelor's degree almost 25 years ago. I have worked in Head Start for over 22 of those years. Our state needs to be investing in its youngest citizens and increasing the slots and services available for them and their families.

Unfortunately, I have seen childcare programs, including Head Start struggle to sustain their services and I have seen the impacts on families when they cannot find quality care options so they can go to work or school. These challenges were highlighted during the pandemic and over the past couple of years, it seemed that some long deserved attentions/focus was coming to the field. Providers/staff saw their wages increase with investments so desperately needed and there was energy building with childcare programs opening in very rural, high need areas. These budget cuts halt that progress. It is a challenge to sustain an early childhood workforce when someone with a degree in the field who has skills and a passion for educating and caring for young children can go work at a local fast food restaurant and make a higher wage. Funding allocations made toward the field cannot be reduced or removed during such a fragile time for the system. I oppose the proposal to cut \$15 million annually from the Child Care Wage Supplement Program. Staff in this field deserve to earn a livable wage.

I also strongly oppose the proposed cut of \$3.6 million annually from Head Start funding. Head Start has been serving communities in Maine and across the country for nearly 60 years. These programs, my program, serves our most vulnerable children and their families with great success. The loss of this funding will take high quality programming away from children with low income, along with the comprehensive supports that are offered to the entire family. Head Start in Maine served 2,633 children and expectant mothers during our 2023-2024 program year, with 265 of these children experiencing homelessness, and 25.7% of preschoolers in Head Start during that time having an identified disability. The proposed funding cuts will eliminate 180 of these quality care slots from communities across Maine and close at least 9 classrooms. Our communities need these services. The impacts of reduced funding will be far reaching and will affect the many partnerships we strive to retain, including those with local family childcare and center-based providers, as well as public Pre-k partnerships. In addition, the proposed budget includes moving \$1.4 million of Funds for a Healthy Maine out of Head Start, replacing it with General Funds. Keeping the Funds for a Healthy Maine in Head Start creates more security for that funding versus putting it at risk if moved into the General Fund.

Investments in the early care and education systems in Maine are an investment in the overall economy. A childcare crisis creates a greater workforce crisis in our state. Access to childcare or lack thereof, effects everyone. Please consider our youngest citizens and the importance of these investments as you make your decisions. Thank you.