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Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and honorable committee members, my name is Helen Lukacs, I live in Alfred, and I urge you to support and fully fund Maine's early childhood education system.

I have a four year old boy and have struggled to find affordable childcare in York County. I was laid off in early 2021 due to the pandemic. It was a hard time to find new employment and I also had a one year old. Luckily, I had a great support system: my mother lives with us and provides free childcare and my husband is self-employed and can take time off when needed. Further, we qualified for assistance in paying for childcare once I found employment.

Despite this all, managing childcare before pre-K was still incredibly difficult and expensive. The financial assistance available was laughably small (a huge amount of time and paperwork to get about \$40 off per week) and was not available while looking for work- but only once I was actively employed. In case this is not obvious, it is very hard to secure work (research, apply, interview, etc) without childcare. Additionally, the childcare agency we found in Springvale had difficulty staying open due to staffing shortages. Luckily, there were a couple dedicated childcare providers who stayed but otherwise, turnover was high.

It is only now, with my son in pre-K, that I am looking to return to the workforce full time. In a state struggling with a work-force shortage, not investing in childcare is such a missed opportunity. I urge you to fully fund Head Start so that parents can keep working. And I urge you to fully fund the Child Care Wage Supplement Program and the Child Care Employment Award so that agencies stay staffed. Thank you for your time and attention.