



**Testimony of Claire Berkowitz
to the Joint Appropriations and Health and Human Services Committees
regarding proposed cuts to Child Care and Head Start in the State Budget
February 13, 2025**

Good morning, Senator Rotundo, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Gattine, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Appropriations and Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Claire Berkowitz, and I serve as the President and CEO of Midcoast Maine Community Action (MMCA).

As a community action agency, MMCA provides Head Start and Early Head Start services to 171 young children and their families across Sagadahoc, Lincoln, and northern Cumberland counties. I am here today to speak about the significant impact the proposed cuts to Head Start and other childcare resources would have on our program and, most importantly, the families we serve.

The additional state Head Start funding has been instrumental in strengthening our program. It has allowed us to hire much-needed staff to ensure classroom stability, manage absences, and maintain a high-quality learning environment. One of the most effective uses of these funds has been the creation of floater positions—teaching assistants who step in to cover teacher breaks, provide essential one-on-one support for children with behavioral challenges, and help ensure that parents can work knowing their children are in a safe and nurturing environment.

These floater positions have become even more critical as Child Development Services (CDS) staff are no longer consistently available to provide specialized support. Without these additional resources, we would struggle to support children with special needs in a way that ensures the safety and well-being of both students and staff. Cutting these funds would place an undue burden on our educators and could compromise the care and education we provide to Maine's most vulnerable children.

Equally concerning is the proposed rollback of the Child Care Educator Salary Supplement Program. This program has been vital in stabilizing MMCA's early education workforce, enabling us to fully open all of our funded classrooms. Reducing these stipends would be a devastating step backward, exacerbating the staffing crisis in early childhood education and making it even more difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers. This would further erode the workforce that our families and communities rely upon.

I fully recognize the complexities of balancing a state budget. However, we cannot do so at the expense of young children and families—especially those who depend on Head Start services to thrive. We also cannot afford to lose the progress we've made in strengthening the early care

and education workforce, a cornerstone of Maine's economy. When we invest in early childhood education, we invest in our future workforce, our communities, and the long-term economic health of our state.

I urge you to protect these critical investments in our children and in the dedicated educators who serve them. I urge you to oppose these proposed cuts in the budget. Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of my testimony as you make these important decisions regarding the state budget.