

**Testimony on Behalf of York County Community Action
on the Child Care and Early Learning Portions of LD 210
In Opposition to Proposed Cuts**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees:

York County Community Action (YCCAC) provides a range of health, education and social services to the people of York County, including Head Start and Early Head Start programming. We submit this testimony in strong opposition to proposed cuts to Head Start and childcare programs, including investments that strengthen the early care workforce.

Access to high quality, affordable childcare is essential for Maine's economy. Yet a shortage of childcare is one of the most common barriers for prospective employees to finding and keeping a job – as well as for employers to achieving workforce retention and growth. In 2023/24, 24,000 Mainers cited lack of available childcare as the primary reason they were not in the labor force (Maine Center for Economic Policy analysis of US Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey). Investments made by the 130th and 131st Legislatures have made significant impact in addressing this issue. The proposed cuts will undermine this important progress.

The proposed budget eliminates \$3.6 million in Head Start funding. At YCCAC, we serve over 150 children and their families in our Head Start and Early Head Start programs. We have extensive waitlists in both programs, and there are hundreds of eligible children in the county. Like Head Start programs across the state, we pride ourselves in ensuring that we serve the children and families who most need our services – including large numbers of children who are experiencing homelessness or have an identified disability. Every dollar invested is critical to providing these services, and every dollar invested helps retain significant federal funding for these services.

The Governor's proposed budget also includes a \$15 million annual reduction in salary supplements to childcare workers, reducing the childcare worker average wage from \$34,112 annually to just \$31,512. Data from Maine's Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the median hourly wage for childcare workers in Maine is lower than that of retail salespeople and food prep workers. Even though many childcare workers hold early childhood education degrees and prepare young children for school, they earn on average 60% of what kindergarten teachers make and just over half of what elementary school teachers make. These challenges are particularly acute in York County, which has the second highest cost of living and housing costs in the state.

Finally, the budget proposes to eliminate the Childcare Employment Award Program (CCEAP) designed to help childcare workers pay for their own children's care. Eliminating this award will negatively impact recruitment and retention of the childcare workforce and therefore of program sustainability. If an educator can choose between working for a public school or a childcare program at nearly the same hourly wage, the CCEAP may be the incentive that makes the difference in choice for childcare.

For the reasons outlined above, YCCAC strongly opposes these proposed cuts.

Thank you for your hard work on behalf of the people of Maine.

Respectfully submitted,

Carter Friend /s/

Carter Friend, CEO