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Due to the weather delay for this hearing, I could not stay for the full morning to provide in-person testimony on Monday, February 24th. The following is what I had prepared for the hearing:

Good morning, Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, as well as the Health and Human Services Committee. I would like to extend a special greeting to Senator Reny, Representative Stover, and Representative Lemelin, as the early childhood program I represent both serves the families of, and employs, your constituents.

My name is Abi Iverson, and I stand before you today as a former Childcare Coordinator for the Central Lincoln County YMCA, the current Development Director for Coastal Kids Preschool, and, most importantly, as a working mother of three young boys aged 9, 6, and 4.

I deeply understand the local challenges families face in finding affordable childcare. I have experienced firsthand the difficulties faced by supervisors in hiring and retaining staff in childcare positions, not to mention well-qualified staff. I have a profound understanding of the struggle non-profit childcare centers endure to keep their doors open and make payroll, not to mention their efforts to provide affordable, high-quality programming for local families.

In recent years, a spotlight has focused on the childcare crisis we face statewide and across the nation. Pulling the plug on that beacon and the funding extended because of that exposure will not make the crisis go away!

In April 2023, a study released by ReadyNation and Educate Maine reported that the “childcare crisis now costs the nation \$122 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue every year.” The study goes on to provide an “estimated \$403 million in annual costs for Maine.” Just shy of two years since that report, funding for childcare in Maine faces a devastating threat. The ReadyNation/Educate Maine study urged policymakers to “support evidence-based policies and programs that enhance the availability and affordability of high-quality childcare,” NOT to DEFUND our programs.

I began my 25-year career in education by supporting both afterschool and preschool programs during two AmeriCorps service commitments that helped fund my bachelor’s and ongoing graduate work in education. I have studied and worked in the field of education across the U.S. and in various countries around the globe.

In 2009, I came to Maine, employed by an organization called Ocean Classroom Foundation. We bought our home in Jefferson in 2013 and started our family in 2015. Over the next 10 years, I worked to exhaustion to balance my family’s childcare needs with our financial needs. While many people may have seamlessly recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, as the mother of a child born in July 2020 and two other children under five at that time, I can say we are far from financially stable to this day. Considering we faced significant work stoppages and a lack of consistent childcare, we are fortunate to remain housed and healthy, but this came at the cost of draining my retirement funds and ultimately filing for bankruptcy.

The day after my youngest turned 15 months and was eligible for care at Coastal Kids Preschool, he was enrolled. Shortly thereafter, I began working for the Central Lincoln County YMCA as the Teen Coordinator, with 30% of our household income going towards childcare. The amount we were paying in childcare was more than three times the base rate of our mortgage and more than twice what we pay U.S. Bank each month with our insurance AND taxes rolled into escrow. In January of 2024, when the after-school program coordinator at the Central Lincoln County YMCA left the position due to burnout, I stepped in as interim with the understanding that our

community could not sacrifice to lose this care for even a day, as this is one of only three programs serving all of AOS 93.

Due to my level of education and experience, I qualified as a Maine Roads to Quality Level 7 childcare employee and was able to earn the highest tier salary stipend. This was a necessity! This effectively brought my hourly average as a supervisor of seven staff, responsible for the wellbeing of 53 children up from \$21/hourly to \$25/hourly. In comparison, I can rarely find a babysitter for my three boys that charges less than \$25/hour.

How can we ask our childcare providers to invest in their education and professional development with zero incentive and expect to pay them the lowest wages possible? I have seen some of our greatest Childcare providers leave our programs to work the drive through at McDonalds in search of financial security. There are many things I can say about this, but in general it makes me sad.

Why is it that this individual would rather work at McDonalds? I realized about a year ago, after celebrating the last package of diapers that I would ever have to buy for my boys, that the amazing staff at early childhood centers not only contend with the tantrums, spend countless hours sitting in chairs designed for 3-year-olds, but most honorably, live in an endless loop of diapering and potty training. As for the elementary school aftercare workers, they graciously welcome dozens of children into their programs who are arguably crawling out of their skin after sitting in school all day, meeting the needs of children across multiple ages and stages, as well as temperaments. These programs and the educators and caring staff cannot be sustained if we cut their funding. This is not a loss the State of Maine can bear.

That said, we have noticed at Coastal Kids Preschool significant staff retention since the supplemental wage stipends have been initiated. We need these staff to stay in our programs and we need to invest in their professional development. Due to a lack of EdTech 3's, our preschool in Damariscotta, which specializes in serving young children with special needs, had to turn away 30 young children identified as needing special services. We are not finding qualified staff to fill these roles, so we need to retain our staff, we need to train our staff, and we need to compensate our staff for the investment they are making in the lives of our children and the future of our state. I will not go back. Do not let the State of Maine go back!

Coastal Kids Preschool is dedicated to providing inclusive, developmentally appropriate preschool education to children of all incomes and abilities. Founded in 1995, it specifically serves our local special needs population with the highest level of early-childhood care. This mission is critically important, as the very first risk factor identified by the CDC for Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is, "families experiencing caregiving challenges related to children with special needs..." The CDC website states that ACEs are linked to "lasting effects on health and well-being in childhood and life opportunities well into adulthood." Continuing to fund childcare in Maine can create positive change in the lives of our community's most vulnerable, enhance the livelihood of our local families, support local businesses, and ultimately strengthen the sustainability of the State of Maine.

Bishop, S., Ph.D., & Russell, K. (2023). The growing, annual cost of the infant-toddler child care crisis in Maine. Maine State Coalition. Retrieved from <https://files.aptuitivcdn.com/8oyQKqMEPL-1031/docs/Educate-Maine-2024-Report-child-care-crisis-costs-Maine-403-million-annually-ONLINE-2.pdf>
<https://www.cdc.gov/aces/risk-factors/index.html>