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Dear Health and Human Services Committee,

As the mother of a child who attends preschool at a wonderful, locally owned small business in Portland, I am writing to express urgent concern over the proposed cuts to Maine's childcare investments in the biennial budget, which threaten the stability of an already fragile industry. These cuts would have significant, far-reaching consequences for childcare educators, families, and industries and businesses across the state if parents are forced to take their children out of childcare programs. I'm asking you to stand up for your community childcare programs and its predominantly woman-led workforce and small business owners and oppose these cuts.

While Head Start may receive funding from the federal government, it's not enough. Maine should be proud to be one of the only states that supports Head Start funding. Families can't work if children don't have high quality childcare. The impact of early childhood education, and specifically Head Start are far-reaching and long term. Early learning provides children with a "head start." Research shows children are more ready for kindergarten, future success in school and later in life. Children who attend Head Start are less likely to end up in jail, further costing the state and taxpayers down the road—virtually ending the cycle of poverty.

Cutting \$30 million from stipends for childcare employees will reduce these already underpaid, essential workers' earnings by \$4,000 over two years. Additionally cutting Head Start funding by \$7 million and canceling the \$5 million scholarship program for childcare workers' children will have detrimental, long term, and major impacts on the children of Maine.

The Maine Center for Economic Policy has recommended a number of options that are alternatives to making these deep cuts to an essential industry that cares for some of the most vulnerable Mainers:

- Creating a "millionaire's tax" to raise over \$200 million next biennium
- Raising the real estate transfer tax on higher priced homes to raise tens of millions of dollars per year
- Increasing the corporate income tax to raise close to \$100 million per year
- Ending ineffective subsidies for wealthy corporations to raise over \$100 million per year
- Increasing taxes on capital gains to raise almost \$120 million per year

Please reconsider these deep and multiple cuts that will have dire impacts on the working families of Maine:

Maine's Child Care Educator Salary Supplement Program

The Governor's proposed \$15 million annual cut to child care educator wages would be devastating. Currently, educators earn an average of \$16.40 per hour (around \$34,000 annually), insufficient for supporting a family. Reducing the wage by half would lower it to \$15.15 per hour (\$31,500 annually), worsening financial strain and exacerbating workforce shortages. This program has seen an 11% increase in educators since its inception, yet cutting funding now would reverse these gains and harm the industry's progress.

Maine's Child Care Employment Award

The child care tuition assistance program, which was delayed over a year in its implementation, is crucial for recruiting and retaining staff by helping workers cover child care costs. The funds were exhausted within three months, supporting around 400 professionals, with over 450 still on the waiting list. This program is vital for maintaining a stable workforce and improving childcare quality statewide. The year-long delay already deprived educators of essential savings on their childcare costs, and cutting the program now would significantly disrupt the support they are receiving.

Head Start

Maine's \$3.6 million investment in Head Start serves 1,742 low-income children. Eliminating this funding would result in the loss of services for 180 children, the closure of 9 classrooms, and potential loss of millions in federal funding. This is a direct threat to the education and well-being of Maine's most vulnerable children.

These cuts undermine the entire early care and education system and threaten Maine's long-term economic growth. Now is the time to invest in our childcare workforce and ensure a stable future for Maine's children and families.

Thank you for your attention to this crucial issue.