

Sara Perrigo
Scarborough
LD 1469

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Sara Perrigo and I am the Co-Director of Heidi's House Child Care Center in Scarborough.

I am testify in favor of LD 1469: An Act to Amend the Quality Rating System for Child Care Services in Maine. We are an accredited center through the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children). We have maintained our accreditation for the last 18 years. We have no problems meeting all the standards to be a 5 Star program on the Quality Rating System for Child Care Services in Maine, however, the requirement to have all 50% of the staff at a level 5 or above is quite difficult to meet and maintain due to the significant struggles to hire teachers. We were barely able to meet it last year and it could be the only thing that keeps us from earning 5 stars the next time we renew. This has been frustrating as it is something we have little control over. I have worked as a Center Director for the past 25 years and have never seen such a shortage of qualified applicants (or any applicants) as I have in the last 3 years. Since the pandemic it is at a point where it continually impacts our ability keep our child care center open. We have a waitlist for every age group, yet we have classrooms that are only partially filled because we cannot hire qualified teachers. We work very hard to have a strong benefits package (including vacation time, personal time, health insurance, vision and dental insurance, 401K with a match, gym membership reimbursement, quarterly bonuses, etc.) and we keep our compensation very competitive for the field. And yet, still we struggle to hire.

The good news is that we do have an amazing team of teachers who are taking advantage of high quality ECE trainings and utilizing the TEACH program. We also have a number of teachers who have degrees in different fields and are newer to the ECE field, so unfortunately it will take several years for them to be able to move up the career lattice to get to a level 5. The ECE field tends to have a higher employee turn over rate than other professions so career lattices that take years to move up on don't help us. Maine, as well as the rest of the nation, are struggling to hire ECE teachers. In fact, there are less students enrolling in ECE degree programs and applying for jobs since the start of the pandemic. It is nearly impossible to hire at all, let alone someone with an ECE degree and prior experience. With this knowledge, it would seem that if we are able to meet all the qualifications to be a nationally accredited program, then the state of Maine could also remove that requirement from their 5 Star Quality Rating level for programs that are NAEYC Accredited. We appreciate your consideration and your time.