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## Maine Association for the Education of Young Children

Testimony in opposition of LD LD406 | LD539 | LD1273 | LD952 | LD1400 | LD1249 | LD1333 |  
LD1712 | LD 1169 | LD 1307 | LD1221

My name is Heather Marden and I am the Co-Executive Director for the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children speaking in opposition to legislation that aims to repeal, restructure, or reduce access to the essential services of Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML).

Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) is deeply connected to the child care system because it provides families with the time and financial stability needed to care for their own children—particularly during the most vulnerable moments, such as after birth or during a serious medical need. In Maine, for example, licensed child care programs are not permitted to enroll infants under six weeks old. Yet many parents, especially those without access to paid leave, face the harsh economic reality of needing to return to work far earlier. PFML bridges this critical gap, ensuring that parents can stay home during those first, essential weeks of life without sacrificing their financial security. By doing so, PFML not only supports child development and parental bonding, but also relieves pressure on the child care system by giving families the option to provide care at home when outside care simply isn't available or appropriate.

While PFML is often framed as a benefit for families—and it is—it is just as vital for those who *care* for those families every day. Child care providers are the foundation of our early learning system. They nurture our children, support working parents, and make it possible for our economy to function. Yet despite the essential nature of their work, child care professionals are among the lowest-paid workers in the country—earning wages in the bottom 3% nationally.

For this workforce, access to PFML is not just about time off for family and medical necessities—it's about survival. The ability to recoup a majority of their wages while taking leave is what makes using the program even possible. Without meaningful wage replacement, many early childhood educators simply cannot afford to take time off when they need it most, whether due to illness, childbirth, or to care for a loved one.

If reimbursement rates under PFML are reduced or capped in ways that do not reflect the real cost of living or the reality of low-wage work, we risk pushing this already-struggling workforce out of the program entirely. For many, a lower benefit amount would mean having to choose between their health—or their family's health—and keeping a roof over their head.

This is a moral issue, but also a structural one. The child care sector already faces immense challenges: staffing shortages, burnout, and financial instability. If educators and caregivers cannot access PFML when they truly need it, they are more likely to leave the field entirely. That loss affects children, families, and communities—and deepens the child care crisis we are all trying to solve.

Let's be clear: PFML is only as effective as it is accessible. To fulfill its promise, it must be designed with low-wage workers in mind. That means strong wage replacement rates, inclusive eligibility, and protections that ensure no one is punished for taking time to care for themselves or their loved ones.

In supporting a robust PFML program, you are investing not only in families, but in the child care professionals who make our economy work. They deserve the same dignity, security, and care that they provide every single day.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to policies that support working families—and those who care for their children.