

Testimony in Support of LD 1736, LD 1859, and LD 1955

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Health and Human Services Committee

My name is April Tardiff, and I am a stay-at-home mom of a high energy 3 year old, from Old Orchard Beach, Maine. I am writing to express my strong support for LD 1736, LD 1859, and LD 1955—three essential bills that take targeted, meaningful steps toward supporting Maine’s child care system.

Becoming new parents in late 2021, my husband and I quickly realized how scarce affordable, high-quality child care truly is. Without a clear date for when we would come off the waitlist, I was asked to resign from my seven-year career shortly after my son was born. It was devastating. The only way I could find care was if I worked inside a center myself—so I made the leap and became an early educator to toddlers.

I was genuinely excited to teach and support other families, while also providing for my own. But I soon learned how little support there is for early educators. We were chronically short-staffed, and often couldn’t even take our full lunch breaks. I started at \$14.50 an hour—significantly less than my previous job. After paying \$350 a week for my son's care, I barely brought home \$100.

After months of struggling, I had to make the heartbreaking decision to leave that job. I couldn’t justify being away from my own child for so little pay and so much stress.

When my son turned two, I enrolled in school to become a medical coder so I could support my family with a more flexible career. But again, child care was a huge barrier. We had to pay \$1,700 just to secure a spot—then wait two months for the opening. A week after starting, we were told they couldn’t support my son’s energy level and that we’d need to find somewhere else. It happened again at another center.

This disrupted my schooling, delayed my graduation, and extended the time I couldn’t contribute fully to my family’s income. We’ve been on the Head Start waitlist since his birth and have worked with CDS for over a year—yet we still can’t access services that would help support our child’s needs.

LD 1736: An Act to Increase the Supply of Child Care Services Through the Use of Contracts

LD 1736 empowers the Office of Child and Family Services to use contracts—rather than only subsidies—to directly support child care providers in delivering care for high-need populations, including infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, and families in underserved areas.

Why this matters:

- Maine loses an estimated **\$403 million annually** in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue due to child care challenges.
- Infants and toddlers are the most expensive and hardest-to-place age group in child care settings, often requiring higher staff-to-child ratios.
- Contract-based funding offers predictability for providers and ensures consistent availability of slots for priority populations.

This bill is a strategic investment in supply-building and service stability, particularly in rural and low-income communities.

LD 1955: An Act to Increase Child Care Affordability and Early Childhood Educator Stability

LD 1955 directly addresses two of the greatest challenges in Maine’s child care system: the affordability of care for families and the retention and compensation of the early childhood workforce. The bill proposes targeted investments in child care affordability, child care educator wage supplements, scholarships, apprenticeships, and direct financial assistance for child care professionals—ensuring that those who educate and care for our youngest learners can afford to remain in the field.

Why this matters:

- **More than 600 families in Maine** are currently on the waitlist for child care affordability programs, reflecting a clear gap between what families can pay and what high-quality care actually costs.
- Child care is often the **largest monthly expense** for working families—sometimes exceeding the cost of housing or college tuition. The average annual cost of child care for an infant in Maine is over **\$10,000 per year**, a figure that is out of reach for many low- and middle-income families.

- At the same time, Maine’s child care educators earn an average of **\$16.40 per hour**—a wage that is not competitive with less demanding jobs in retail or food service. Many educators live at or near the poverty line and cannot afford health care, housing, or child care themselves.
- The introduction of Maine’s **Child Care Educator Wage Supplement Program** has already shown promising results: the state saw a **workforce increase of 11% to 15%**, reversing trends of high turnover and burnout that have plagued the sector for years.
- Without sustained funding and continued investment, this progress is at risk. We must maintain and grow our child care workforce by continuing to invest in their **wages, benefits, and educational pathways**.

Families cannot afford child care, and providers cannot afford to stay in the field. LD 1955 recognizes that **affordable, quality child care depends on a stable, well-compensated workforce**—and makes the strategic investments needed to support both.

LD 1859: An Act to Improve Access to Child Care and Early Childhood Education by Establishing Regional Resource Hubs

LD 1859 directs the Department of Health and Human Services to establish regional early childhood learning and development resource hubs. These hubs will be affiliated with existing regional nonprofit organizations to promote early childhood learning, support family needs, and increase access to high-quality early childhood education. Key functions include conducting regional needs assessments, assisting parents in locating and applying for child care programs, connecting families to local and state resources, supporting educators, and collaborating with employers and educators to meet local child care needs.

Why this matters:

- **Addressing Child Care Deserts:** Many regions in Maine lack sufficient child care options, making it challenging for families to find quality care. By establishing regional hubs, LD 1859 aims to identify and address these gaps effectively.

- **Supporting Working Families:** With approximately 67% of Maine children under the age of six having all available parents in the workforce, accessible child care is crucial.
- **Enhancing Coordination:** The hubs will serve as centralized points for information and resources, reducing fragmentation and improving service delivery for families and providers alike.

LD 1859 represents a strategic approach to strengthening Maine's early childhood infrastructure, ensuring that families have the support they need to access quality child care and education services.

Conclusion:

Together, these three bills offer a comprehensive response to Maine's child care challenges by strengthening supply, increasing affordability, supporting education, and honoring the workforce. I respectfully urge the committee to vote "**Ought to Pass**" on LD 1878, LD 1934, and LD 1955.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Maine's children and families.

Sincerely,

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