



Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee, thank you for the chance to testify in support of LD 1955 today. My name is Cate Blackford and I am the public policy director for the Maine People's Alliance. MPA is Maine's largest community action organization with over 32,000 members stretching from Kittery to Fort Kent. MPA believes everyone should have what they need, contribute what they can, and no one should be left behind. I also have the pleasure of serving on the board of the Islesboro Preschool and am a parent of two children who went through daycare, preschool and preK.

We all need quality, accessible child care. Not just parents and children. Early childhood education and care is the essential foundation for our children's ability to thrive in school and beyond, for employers who are struggling to find and keep great staff because they don't have adequate care for their children, and for all of us who rely on those employers, our communities' businesses and services, to get through our day to day. If we want our communities to function now and the next generation to succeed, we *all* need our state to have quality, accessible, affordable childcare for every family that wants it.

That is why the measures in LD 1955 to support our early childhood educators, improve the path to becoming an early childhood educator, and make strides towards all families being able to afford and access child care are so important. The Salary Sustainability Program for Child Care Professionals, the scholarships and apprenticeship programs for becoming an early childhood educator, the continuation of the staff scholarship program, and the sustainability and expansion of the Child Care Affordability Program are all essential steps for us to take if we want quality, accessible childcare for families across the state.

Right now, child care is incredibly expensive and a heavy burden on the budgets of not just low & moderate income families, but also middle income families. The average cost of child care in Maine is comparable to a mortgage payment or in-state college tuition. For too many families, it's simply out of reach. When families can't afford care, they are often choosing to have one parent stop working, further exacerbating our workforce shortage. Or they are making tradeoffs in their household budget, which also weakens our local economy and makes people less financially stable, whether that means they're cutting out everything but the basic necessities, not able to save for emergencies, or in many cases going into debt to cover everything. It is not just low and moderate income families feeling the squeeze and making tough choices - it is our middle income families as well. That's why the state set the goal a few years ago that no family should pay more than 7% of our income on child care, and why the steps we have taken over the past few years to expand support for families are critical. LD 1955, builds on those steps, moving us forward by requiring the Department of Health and Human Services to develop a long-term plan for financial sustainability of the Maine Child Care Affordability Program.

At the same time as we are addressing the affordability crisis for families, we must also address the workforce shortage that comes, in large part, from the low wages of early childhood educators. We cannot create the system we need without ensuring the salaries of providers are commensurate with the value of early childhood education and care in our communities, and at a minimum, high enough to attract and retain the educators we desperately need.

This bill takes measured steps towards addressing the supply of early childhood educators, building on the success of the Salary Supplement Program. If we do not continue to build on the steps taken over the past few years, we will be quick to lose the progress made. The Salary Sustainability Program, the scholarships and apprenticeships for training to become an early childhood educator and the staff scholarship program are all being proposed because we have seen the success of their pilots and the evidence shows that making these investments is critical to developing and maintaining the essential early childhood education workforce that our communities so desperately need. We must raise wages, grow the pipeline of educators, give people hands-on training, and support people already in this field and those joining it so that they stay.

I serve on the board of our local preschool. Every year we struggle to balance the need to pay our staff more, to keep up with the rising cost of living and make sure they know how valuable their work is, while at the same time not squeezing parents who are struggling with those same cost increases in everything from housing to gas to groceries. The Salary Supplement Program was an incredibly helpful program in balancing those needs. When funding per teacher declined as our workforce grew, teachers and directors were left frustrated and wondering if they could continue their plans in this field. Supporting their wages is not just a social good—it's an economic strategy. Maine loses around \$400 million annually in lost wages and productivity to lack of child care.

We have heard a lot this session about how we have so many urgent needs, especially in childcare, and we have no funding. I would be remiss if I didn't speak to that today. We absolutely need a long term, sustainable funding plan for supporting the child care affordability program so that all families are served. Raising revenue on wealthy Mainers is absolutely an option to help us avoid pitting these needs against each other.

When we raise revenue by taxing the wealthiest Mainers, we can access [hundreds of millions of dollars every year](#) we've been leaving on the table – all without raising taxes on ordinary Mainers – by raising taxes on the wealthiest Mainers (with a [millionaire's tax](#) and other bills); making sure that rich corporations pay what they truly owe in taxes (like by closing loopholes and [ending ineffective subsidies](#)); and making our income tax system more progressive (for example, by [adding higher tax brackets](#) for higher earners).

As families struggle to find childcare they can afford, childcare providers are struggling to survive, and the state is struggling to keep parents in the workforce — that hurts us all. We need to be growing our supports for childcare providers and parents – not shrinking them.

Kids represent the future of this state, and good childcare options help ensure that families can afford to stay in Maine – or move here to work. With more revenue, we can support families and providers – and grow both our economy and workforce.

With more revenue, we can fund these vital improvements to our system, and help take care of our families – and grow our economy.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.