

LD 1995 Testimony 5/14/25

Juana Rodriguez Vazquez

Executive Director, Mano en Mano

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Juana Rodriguez-Vazquez, and I am the Executive Director of Mano en Mano and the founder of Rayitos de Sol Bilingual Childcare in Milbridge, Maine. I'm here today to speak in strong support of LD 1955—not just as a nonprofit leader, but as a mother and someone who has walked alongside families and educators navigating a childcare system that often feels impossible.

When we opened Rayitos de Sol in 2021, it was in direct response to what our community told us: that families needed a place where their language, culture, and children would be welcomed, valued, and supported. In our first year, we operated out of a single classroom. Today, thanks to the hard work of our staff and the trust of the families we serve, we've grown into a new, 6,600-square-foot center that can serve up to 64 children—from infants to elementary schoolers.

More than 60% of the families at Rayitos are migrant farmworkers. Many arrive in Downeast Maine for the blueberry and wreath-making seasons and struggle to find care that is affordable, consistent, or culturally responsive. They want what every parent wants: to know their child is safe, learning, and cared for while they're working hard to support their families. For many, we're the only center in the region that can offer that.

But meeting those needs takes more than good intentions. It requires resources, especially when it comes to supporting the educators who make it all possible.

LD 1955 matters because it addresses the root issues we see every day:

- **Educators need support, too.** Many of our staff are parents themselves, and we know firsthand how hard it is to stay in this profession when you can't find care for your own child. The Child Care Award would make a meaningful difference in the lives of our educators and help us retain the people who love and believe in this work.
- **The workforce crisis is real.** At Rayitos, we pay above-average wages, offer benefits, and compensate multilingual staff for their skills. But we're the exception, not the rule. Too many talented educators leave the field because they simply can't afford to stay. The Salary Sustainability Program would help change that.

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- **We need to invest in the next generation.** We've created paid internships and college assistantships for students interested in early childhood education, but we need more support to build real career pathways. The scholarship and apprenticeship programs in LD 1955 are exactly what's needed to grow and sustain a skilled, passionate workforce.

Every child in Maine deserves the chance to thrive, and every educator deserves the support to make that possible. LD 1955 is a step toward a childcare system that works—for children, for families, and for the people who care for them every day.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to building a stronger, more equitable future for all of us.

With deep gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Juana Rodriguez-Vazquez'.

Juana Rodriguez-Vazquez

Executive Director, Mano en Mano

Founder, Rayitos de Sol Bilingual Childcare