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January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Re: Testimony in Support of LD 1414 – An Act to Support and Sustain Maine's Child Care Workforce

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and the members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

On behalf of the Maine Community Action Partnership (MeCAP) and the Community Action Agencies serving all sixteen counties, I write in strong support of LD 1414, An Act to Support and Sustain Maine's Child Care Workforce. This bill advances a series of steps to stabilize the workforce that reinforces child development, family economic security, and Maine's broader economy.

Maine continues to face significant shortages of qualified early educators, resulting in closed classrooms, under-enrollment, and persistent waitlists, even among highly eligible families. As of December, five classrooms across our state are closed due to staffing constraints, and multiple programs are unable to enroll at their planned capacity. Families who qualify are waiting for services that providers cannot offer without staff.

Nearly **one in four Maine families** lives in what is effectively a child care desert, an area with only one licensed child care slot for every three children under age five. In many rural communities, the shortages are even more severe, leaving parents with no viable options and forcing them to reduce work hours, leave the workforce entirely, or rely on unsafe or unstable arrangements. At the same time, for families who can find a slot, cost remains a major barrier. On average, child care consumes **20–30% of a household's total income**, far exceeding what is considered affordable. The average annual cost of infant care in Maine, **\$11,000 to \$12,000 per year**, is simply out of reach for many low-income and even moderate-income families. This combination of severe scarcity and unaffordability creates a system that is failing families, employers, and the broader economy.

LD 1414 is designed to support and sustain the workforce. The recent amendment language under consideration would target supplements for infant/toddler care and create a planning grant program for overnight care, addressing two of the most acute access gaps for families.

By stabilizing early educators, particularly in infant/toddler care and in hard-to-cover hours, this bill helps keep classrooms open, supports family employment, and strengthens Maine's early childhood infrastructure.

Thank you for your consideration and for your dedication to Maine's children and families. I am happy to provide additional data or program perspectives at the Committee's convenience.

Sincerely,

*Victoria D. Forkus*

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