

Testimony of Rita Furlow  
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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and  
the Committee on Health and Human Services  
on LD 2212, the Governor's Biennial Budget  
February 18, 2026

Good morning, Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine and Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services. My name is Rita Furlow. I am the Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance. We are a statewide non-partisan advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies and best practices to improve the lives of Maine children, youth, and families.

Developmental science is clear: brains are built from the bottom up. Stable, responsive relationships and high-quality early learning in the earliest years create the foundation for lifelong health, academic success, and economic productivity.<sup>1</sup> When we invest early, children gain the cognitive and social-emotional skills they need to thrive—and those investments pay off for Maine.

I offer testimony today in appreciation of the many provisions of this budget that support the daily needs of children and families. We strongly support the preventative health care and well-child visits that are supported by MaineCare. We appreciate the investment in evidence-based services such as the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership to intervene early to address challenging behaviors in young children that can disrupt their ability to participate in school and early childhood programs. We also appreciate the Legislature's continued commitment to invest in child care through the Child Care Affordability Program.

We support the provisions in the budget related to funding for increased costs to the state to implement changes to SNAP and Medicaid necessary to be in compliance with HR 1. That said, we are concerned that the budget proposal does not include specific funding to mitigate the impact to children and families related to SNAP and Medicaid cuts from HR 1.

We appreciate the Governor's consideration of the use of the Budget Stabilization Fund to implement an Affordability Payment Program, recognizing the increase cost of living and everyday goods many Mainers are feeling financially pinched by. And, we know that pressure will not be felt equally across all Mainers. We strongly encourage this committee to consider opportunities to utilize the Budget Stabilization Fund in a more targeted fashion, specifically to mitigate the harm of the cuts to food and health care as a direct result of HR 1. This committee and this Legislature

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<sup>1</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). *Children's Emotional Development Is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains: Working Paper No. 2*. Retrieved from: <https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Childrens-Emotional-Development-Is-Built-into-the-Architecture-of-Their-Brains.pdf>

have an important opportunity to step up where the federal government has stepped back – to show Maine families we have their backs when it comes to their health and well-being.

We know that too many of our youngest children are living in poverty. Data from KIDS COUNT indicates that approximately 9,000 children under the age of five in Maine are living below the federal poverty level. In 2023, the poverty threshold for a family of four with two children was \$30,900.<sup>2</sup>

In order to participate in the workforce and support their families, parents must have child care. We know that 70.4% of children under age six have all available parents in workforce – that is approximately 51,000 children whose families likely need child care.

The **Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)** is the federal government’s primary funding stream to help low-income families afford child care so parents can work or attend school. It is intentionally structured to prioritize the most vulnerable children — including those experiencing homelessness, children with disabilities or IEPs, and families with very low incomes (often below 30% of State Median Income, which is approximately \$21,000 in Maine.)<sup>3</sup>

When adequately funded, this structure promotes stability, workforce participation, and healthy child development by reducing fees and expediting access to care. However, because funding is capped, only a fraction of eligible families are served in Maine. When funds run short, even priority populations face waiting lists, delayed access, or unaffordable out-of-pocket costs — undermining employment stability for parents and continuity of care for children who can least afford disruption.

In Maine, the state’s Child Care Affordability Program is serving just 4,101 children according to a recent Department commissioned report.<sup>4</sup> A recent study commissioned by the Department of Health & Human Services noted that participation in Maine’s Child Care Affordability Program is unusually low, with approximately 7% of eligible children participating. This is significantly below the national average of 14.5% of qualifying low-income children receiving child care subsidies.

Unfortunately, the cost of child care is out of reach for too many Maine families.<sup>5</sup> Our most recent KIDS COUNT data book found the average annual cost of child care for an infant to cost approximately \$12,560. These high costs for care are why it is essential that parents have assistance paying for child care in order to work and support their family.

With a current wait list of approximately 1,000 children for the Child Care Affordability Program, the time is now to provide relief to Maine families.

Finally, we would also like address our disappointment at the Department decision in July of 2025 to terminate an early childhood program that was enacted by the legislature in 2021, called First 4

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<sup>2</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6 WITH ALL AVAILABLE PARENTS IN WORK FORCE, DETAILED IN MAINE, retrieved from: <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/7317-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-work-force-detailed?loc=21&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/1096,2545,1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573/any/14380,14381>

<sup>3</sup> [https://liheapch.acf.gov/profiles/povertytables/FY2026/mesmi.htm?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://liheapch.acf.gov/profiles/povertytables/FY2026/mesmi.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>4</sup> Hawley, T., Hagstrom, A., & Nyman, S. (2025). *Cost of Expanding Maine’s Child Care Affordability Program* (Legislative Document No. 12249). Center for Early Learning Funding Equity, Maine Office of Child and Family Services. Maine State Legislature. Retrieved from <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/12249> also see

<sup>5</sup> Childcare Prices as a Share of Median Family Income by Age of Children and Care Setting 2022, United States Department of Labor (2022), retrieved from: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/topics/childcare/median-family-income-by-age-care-setting-2022>

ME.<sup>6</sup> The model was based on a successful program in Skowhegan with the goal of improving long-term developmental and educational outcomes of young children. After a competitive application, four communities in Aroostook County, Lewiston/Auburn, York County, and Portland were selected to administer the project. The termination of this project impacted approximately 528 children, and 16 child care providers in those communities.<sup>7</sup>

Thank you for your consideration.

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<sup>6</sup> 22 M.R.S. § 3931 (First 4 ME Early Care and Education Program) (2024). <https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/22/title22sec3931.html>

<sup>7</sup> Maine Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). *First4ME*. Maine.gov. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/support-for-families/child-care/first4me>