

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; and Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Service:

I am moved to add my testimony to this complex issue of budget priorities, because this morning I read a news story about the growing number of child care workers who are not able to afford food for themselves or their families (Sullivan 2026). This rise in hunger was precipitous but not surprising; and definitely not necessary - the hunger of care providers reflects our choice to disregard their core humanity and contribution. Our Federal and State budgets find short term convenience in ignoring the importance of caregiving labor, but this fuels ongoing disparities and crises that exhaust us all.

There have been countless studies and books written about the importance of addressing our dependence on women's unpaid caregiving as the engine for our overall economy (See Calarco 2024 for a review). Rooted in a deeply old fashioned presumption that everyone lives in a heterosexual family with a male "wage labor" earner and a female care provider, our core economic principals and investments have changed little despite massive changes in workforce participation since the 1950s. The introduction of "workfare" through TANF in 1994 cemented the demand that all adults in the United States participate in wage labor. Caregiving remained low wage or no wage work, feminized and obligatory as labors of love.

I've lived in Maine for most of my life and I know that we share some common values. Maine people respect self-reliance and independence, yes, but I do not know a single person who wishes that children or their caregivers go hungry or think that we can create a strong future without investments in the next generation. I don't know anyone who wishes that millionaires and billionaires receive tax deals to buy more investment properties and beach houses on our coast while everyday families experience devastating economic strain.

Representative Laurel Libby recently posted on facebook about the importance of investments in roads and schools (and lower taxes) and blamed money for Planned Parenthood on our inability to meet these other social obligations. The comments often reinforce the precarity so many families experience, but misplaced blame on other families who are also doing their best. We know that every dollar spent on preventative health care saves tax payers in the long run, and PPNNE provides essential health care including, but not limited to reproductive care. At a time when giving birth is becoming more dangerous (Grose 2025), it is extremely shortsighted to pit investments in health care against roads, schools or fair taxes for lower wage families. If we cannot agree on other spending cuts, we need to raise revenue from our wealthiest corporations and individuals. Solving the budget on the backs of caregivers is a recipe for disaster and deeply unfair.

Many of us read Matthew Desmond's book Poverty, by America (2022) and confronted the glaring reality that poverty is a choice we collectively consign people to experience. We can collectively make different choices that allow all of us to access our basic needs, which include clean water, food and health care, housing, freedom from violence, time to care and be cared for, time to work and time to rest. These are core human rights - clearly detailed in the Declaration of Human Rights but cast aside in our current economic arrangements. Maine should enact a budget that starts with addressing disparities leaving too many people with too few resources and grow from there.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Simmons, PhD
Portland, ME

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