

MAINE

February 21, 2023

Re: "An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025," specifically the child care wage support program (pg. A307)

Dear Chairs Rotundo, Baldacci, Sachs and Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees,

Please accept my written testimony in support of the child care wage supplements within the Health and Human Services portion of the biennial budget before you today.

I offer my comments as a business leader, as a member of Educate Maine's Board of Directors and as a member of the business organization ReadyNation. Gorham Saving Bank and these organizations are working to support the MaineSpark Coalition's work toward achieving Maine's educational attainment goal that 60 percent of Maine adults have a credential of value by 2025.

I believe that the lack of access to quality early learning found in child care is an economic issue for Maine.

Over the course of the last few years there has been an increasing number of news reports and editorials commenting on the fragility of the child care sector, how that was made worse by the pandemic, and the ongoing struggles within the child care workforce plagued by low wages, long hours, and high turnover. And the fact that all of these issues are challenging every sector of Maine's economy, especially in rural Maine.

For industries like mine and many others, many of my employees rely on child care so they can work with the peace of mind that their children are safe, and nurtured. The stark reality is that child care is the workforce that supports all other workforces in Maine.

Without affordable and accessible child care, Maine's economy suffers.

From a business perspective, the lack of access to child care programs, especially that faced by rural children and their families, is a real economic challenge for Maine.

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As policymakers know well, Maine is the most rural state in our nation. Nearly a quarter – 23 percent – of kids in rural Maine live in poverty. They often lack access to resources, including early education programs and child care. In fact, 2021 and 2023 reports by Council for a Strong America indicate that 26 percent of Maine's rural children today live in "child care deserts," where three times more kids are eligible for child care than there are licensed slots.

Quality early learning and child care programs significantly help kids build a strong foundation for success throughout school and as adults. They are a key part of the solution to increasing both the number of people in Maine's workforce and their skill level, two of Maine's biggest economic challenges. These programs can also serve to attract new families to our state, helping to grow Maine's workforce.

For all of these reasons, I am pleased to support Governor Mill's biennial budget commitment to continue to fund the \$200/month in wage stipends to all child care providers. I also understand that later this session Senate President Jackson will propose legislation to further increase the wage supplement. It is my hope that all of you will work in a bi-partisan fashion to also support that proposal when it is before your respective Committees.

It is an economic imperative that Maine prioritize investments that improve access to quality child care for our kids. It also is our responsibility to make sure every child – regardless of where they live – has access to the resources and supports that will help them succeed in life.

Thank you for our consideration of my comments and your work and dedication to building a strong economy for Maine.

Sincerely,

Steve deCastro

Steve deCastro
President and CEO, Gorham Savings Bank
Gorham