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Testimony in Support of LD 1726
An Act to Build Maine’s Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families

Presented to the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
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Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Troy Jackson I serve as President of the Maine Senate and have the great honor of representing Aroostook County in the Legislature I am here today to introduce LD 1726, “An Act to Build Maine’s Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families ”

Maine’s child care system isn’t working for anyone – not working parents, employers or even providers For working families, trying to find quality affordable child care with open slots is practically impossible Instead, parents are toiling away on lengthy waitlists while being forced to either cut back their working hours or exit the workforce altogether For employers, the lack of child care has only added to existing workforce shortages which negatively affects their bottomline As for the professionals who work in or run child care programs, they are struggling to make ends meet Stagnant wages have made it impossible for folks to remain in the industry, let alone keep their doors open and caring for kids

In recent years, the Legislature has established a program that expands access to care by working with existing providers to open child care slots, hire and train staff, and improve wages We’ve also created grant programs to help providers open or expand programs and invested in child care workforce training programs This is a good start but we need to do more for the sake of our families, communities and economy The proposal before you would transform Maine’s child care system by doubling the wage stipend for child care providers and dramatically improving affordability for eligible families

Like any industry, child care providers are experiencing workforce shortages which impact their ability to provide care But low wages in this field have made it harder to attract and retain workers in this field despite their love of the work At the same time, there are fewer licensed child care providers in Maine than a decade ago According to the KIDS COUNT Data Center, there are 350 fewer licensed child care providers across the state today than in 2013 ¹ So not only are there fewer child care options across the state but the providers that remain open are often operating at limited capacity due to the lack of staff

¹<https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/7719-licensed-child-care-centers-and-family-child-care-providers?tab=Details&col=5/3285/vCol/10957048574/672937&71370/57829369/40174015/4499800-423-6900> * TTY 711
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Increasing the wage stipend to \$400 a month will help child care teachers make ends meet and pay their bills while also sending a clear message that this is an industry where folks can earn a living and make a good career for themselves. We talk a lot about child care workers being invaluable to our workforce. It's time to start paying them as such.

The second key piece of this proposal involves overhauling the child care subsidy program to make child care more affordable for eligible families and make the program work better for providers. Right now, roughly 70 percent of all Maine children under the age of six live in households where all available parents work. This makes sense as rising costs have made it harder to run a household and raise a family on one income. As a result, more families need quality, affordable child care. However, the cost of care has also increased and providers are doing what they can to ease the burden on parents, but they need help. LD 1726 would expand the child care subsidy program, otherwise known as the child care scholarship program, to those making 125 percent of the state's median income. This will make more families eligible for assistance and remove barriers to the workforce addressing shortages in other industries.

Other components of this legislation include data collection, establishing a child care task force, restructuring child care subsidy reimbursement in a way that works better for providers and more.

The failure to value and prioritize child care workers — the workforce behind the workforce that keeps our families, communities and economy running — is finally catching up to us. LD 1726 would transform Maine's child care system by raising wages, improving access to scholarship programs and making changes to data collection and program delivery that are long overdue.

If you don't think that there is a child care problem in this state, you are not paying attention. If you think the answer to our child care crisis is taking away the guardrails that keep kids safe, you aren't listening to parents or providers. Investing in quality, affordable child care makes clear that we are a state that values our providers and supports working families.

Thank you for your time today. I hope you will join me in supporting this proposal and investing in a child care system that works for Maine. Though I am happy to take any questions, there are a number of parents, providers and business owners from around the state who can speak to why this bill is sorely needed.