

The Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
131st Maine Legislature
Testimony from Katherine Johnston, Resident, Hallowell, ME

In Support Of

LD 1726 “An Act to Build Maine’s Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families”

Wednesday, May 10, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Katherine Johnston and I am the parent of two young daughters, Margot, age 3, and Norah, 7 months. My family lives in Hallowell.

I am here to testify in strong support of LD 1726, both as a parent and as someone who has worked in early childhood policy and knows deeply how critical these investments are in our citizens, now and into the future.

As many of you know, being a parent is hard. Really hard. It is also the most rewarding thing I have ever done, but the choice to have children has come at a tremendous cost and immense stress daily. In Maine today, the shortage of quality – or, frankly, ANY child care – is acute. Before my first daughter was born in 2019, my husband and I called 37 - THIRTY-SEVEN! – childcare providers in order to find a slot for our baby. 37 is also the exact number of miles this center was from our house. We took the slot.

The childcare situation is even worse in 2023. I left my full-time job working on childcare in the Governor’s Office in January because – in a feat of irony – we could not find childcare for our second baby. I’ve spoken with child care center directors at length about what it would take for their supply of child care to come even a small amount closer to meeting the overwhelming demand. Their answer is the same every time: workforce.

I had a heartbreaking conversation with a center director who has been a champion for high-quality care in the community. She raised money to expand her center and had to scale back proposed offerings, cutting two rooms for young children out of the expansion plans because of the uncertainty of the pandemic, and she calls this misfortune a “silver lining” from the business perspective because finding childcare workers to staff existing classrooms has been next to impossible. The work is challenging, underpaid, and unable to be further subsidized by parent tuition, which is already crippling. Parents are in a bind that is hard to imagine if you haven’t had children within the past ten years or so. Wages may not or may only just barely cover the cost of care, which is about \$1,000/mo per child on average, not enough to pay childcare educators the wages they deserve and yet financially terrifying for families who are spending well over their mortgages each month for the privilege of being able to work.

This is one of the biggest issues facing our state today and this bill is first step at trying to tackle this daily nightmare for parents and communities. The bill provides for absolutely necessary

salary stipends to attract and retain a critical child care workforce. It invests in building a system that at least begins to acknowledge the real cost of providing care. It provides for critical data collection that is necessary to create stronger policies and supports for parents and providers. It demonstrates a commitment to supporting families when their needs for care are the highest, when the investments in children pay off the most, and when parents are least able to be able to find and pay for care that is necessary for us to work. The investment alone in getting parents back into the workforce to power our economy will be immense. It is heartbreaking to see how many parents across Maine are screaming into Facebook groups trying to find any care for their children so they can go to work. It is a thoroughly broken market and the *only* path forward is with public investment.

I often wonder how we got to this place, where both parents have to work to make ends meet in this economic climate and yet it's the earliest years when our children need the most hands-on care, when their brains are growing the most, and society says, "we'll help you out when they turn 5." This keeps me up at night more than my baby. I urge you to pass LD 1726. Thank you for your time.