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Testimony of Rhonda Kaiser

In support of

LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care and Working Families
Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee My name is Rhonda Kaiser and I am the Director at Educare Central Maine, an early childhood school that provides high-quality care and education for infants, toddlers and preschoolers I'm testifying in support of LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care and Working Families

What could be more vital to Maine communities than how we care for our children and families? Long before the pandemic, child care issues were a major challenge for businesses Today, more than ever, we face billions of dollars in economic productivity and revenue losses due to the lack of accessible, stable, reliable and affordable child care options

Federal Poverty thresholds do not account for living costs beyond a very basic food budget The federal poverty measure does not take into consideration costs like childcare and health care that not only draw from one's income, but also are determining factors in one's ability to work and to endure the potential hardships associated with balancing employment and other aspects of everyday life.

Let's look at the math

- 1 For single parents- to qualify for services under the current Federal Poverty Level A single parent of one child, working full-time and earning minimum wage (equates to \$28,704 annually) does NOT qualify for Head Start (the maximum federal poverty level is \$19,718 annually) Raising State Head Start eligibility to 185% of Federal Poverty Level (this would allow a single parent to make \$17.53 per hour) would help working single parents access comprehensive Head Start services for their child/ren
- 2 For two parents working full-time, with two children, the combined hourly wage cannot be greater than \$14.43 per hour (which is \$7.22 per hour per working parent), or \$30,000 annually, to qualify for services guided by the Federal Poverty Level guidelines By raising state eligibility for Head Start to 185% of Federal Poverty Level each parent could earn up to \$13.34 per hour (still under minimum wage)

Children and families stand to benefit tremendously from Head Start and child care—but only if they can access it in their community increasing eligibility for enrollment in Head Start to 185% of the federal poverty level and increasing eligibility for child care subsidies from 85% of the State's median income to 125% of the state's median income would allow more families to stay in or enter the workforce!

Raising child care subsidy and Head Start eligibility will help parents access care but how do we assure we have the qualified early childhood workforce to care for our children? We won't do it by paying them \$17/hour The average annual salary for an early childhood teacher in Maine is approximately \$35,000 Since research has proven that 85% of a child's core brain structure is formed by age five (which means that a child's experiences during the first five years of life can greatly impact the brain's ability to develop) why wouldn't we invest in those individuals that play such an enormous role in our children's future success? Early childhood educators are essential Funding that covers the cost of care, which includes fair compensation for the skilled, valuable, and essential work of our early childhood educators is necessary Raising early childhood educator wages translates into more individuals enter the workforce to care for our children resulting in an increase of billions of dollars in economic productivity and revenue gains

If parents and caregivers can't get child care they can't go to work It's time to treat child care like what it is as essential to economic growth as infrastructure or energy