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Testimony on Behalf of Invest in Tomorrow *in support of* LD 1726, An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families

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Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. **I am here today to testify in support of this bill on behalf of Invest in Tomorrow.**

Invest in Tomorrow is an initiative undertaken in 2017 by Maine organizations, businesses and individuals, to cut Maine's child poverty rate in half over the next ten years, while at the same time, strengthening Maine's workforce. Invest in Tomorrow's work is rooted in the belief that we all have a stake in addressing child poverty. Poverty challenges our schools, our health care system, our communities, our workforce, and our economy. Invest in Tomorrow envisions a world in which families can meet their basic needs to thrive and find gainful, sustainable employment, lifting their families out of poverty and setting us all on a better path. To that end, we work towards promising policy solutions that will increase the likelihood that every Maine child gets what they need to have a fair shot at a bright future, like the bill before you today.

In 2017 and 2018, Invest in Tomorrow held child poverty forums in various parts of the state experiencing higher levels of poverty, including in Androscoggin, Aroostook, Piscataquis and Washington counties. We conducted follow-up meetings, interviews with stakeholders statewide, and conducted an online survey with over 180 respondents. From this, we identified the need for more quality and affordable child care and early education as a primary focus for the initiative.

These findings are also in line with the state's 10 Year Economic Development Plan and supported by recommendations from the Governor's Economic Recovery Committee. Both prioritize creating a high quality, accessible, and affordable early care and education system and highlight the need to build the infrastructure needed to attract and support workers to participate in the economy. By building a stronger child care system for the benefit of both parents and children, LD 1726 supports the goals laid out in these plans.

Quality, affordable child care and early learning is critical to helping Maine families enter and stay in the workforce

Even before the pandemic, a shortage of quality, affordable child care and early education was one of the most common barriers to finding and keeping a job for parents with low income. Close to 70% of Maine children under the age of six live in households in which all parents are working, according to the most recent data available¹. We know that if these parents don't have access to child care, they can't go to work. In addition to the shortage of supply, parents face the significant barrier of affordability. According to the most recent Kids Count Databook, the average cost of infant care in Maine is \$11,700. When compared to other household expenses, child care can exceed housing costs and college tuition².

Quality child care and early learning help set children up for success

In addition to enabling parents to work, high-quality early learning experiences are important in their own right. They help set children on a path to success in school, leading to higher education and a career, with low income children and English learners benefiting the most³. Our state's future prosperity and workforce depend on our youngest children getting what they need to learn, grow, thrive, and become the adults who will strengthen our communities and build our economy.

¹

<https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=1&loct=1#detailed/2/21/false/2048,1729,37,871,870,869,36,868,867,133/any/11472,11473>

²

https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2021%20Price%20of%20Care%20State%20Sheets/Maine_Price%20Fact%20Sheet%202021.pdf

³

<http://www.srcd.org/policy-media/policy-updates/meet-ings-briefings/investing-our-future-evidence-base-early-childhood-education> and https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Building_Blocks_Early_Childhood_Education_04202016.pdf

Research shows the long-term benefits of quality, early learning experiences. Programs that begin at birth lead to better outcomes for children and yield up to a 13% annual return on public investment.⁴

LD 1726 would benefit children, families, and employers

This bill would help begin to address the child care crisis in our state and move us towards the goal of limiting child care costs within the next ten years so that families are not paying more than 7% of their income towards child care. It would increase eligibility and access to the Child Care Subsidy Program, a hugely beneficial program for families with low- to moderate-incomes in the state. It would also speed up eligibility determinations, which can be a barrier to a parent being able to start a new job. The bill would require a report that evaluates and makes recommendations as to how the state could increase enrollment and reduce barriers to families receiving child care subsidies.

This bill also makes critical investments in our state's child care workers - the backbone of our workforce - who allow for parents to work and provide essential learning and development experiences for Maine's future workers and leaders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we support LD 1726 because it advances the goals of Invest in Tomorrow by helping to ensure parents and caregivers have access to quality, affordable child care and early learning so they can sustain employment while providing their children with the support and learning necessary for healthy development. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this bill. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

⁴ https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2031/2023_kidscount_databook_interactive.pdf and https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2892417