

LD 219 ChildCare Bill

To the Health and Human Service Committee,

LD 219 is the **BARE MINIMUM** to what is needed to stabilize childcare in Maine. With the financial crisis that Maine Childcare faces there is no incentive to enroll children who are on subsidies. We are all hurting and cannot suffer further losses through the subsidy programs without these improvements to the program.

As for the One Time Emergency Financial Assistance portion of the bill it may in fact keep further doors from closing in the childcare community.

What this bill does not do:

Why are we waiting until it is a dire emergency of closure to offer financial assistance to childcare programs. By the time a childcare program is in the situation to qualify for this assistance too much damage may have been done to the financial viability of the business. This may look like past due rent or the buildup of other payables or the dropping of essential benefits to employees or families. Damaging credit or extending lines of credit or assuming high interest credit card debt. This is like offering a band aide to a terminal patient.

In my personal experience as the owner of Heidi's House Childcare in Scarborough which was established in 1988 and is fully accredited by the NAEYC I can tell you with certainty that the situation has never been more threatening. Having been a full school with enrollment of 128 children from Infants through School age with an extensive waiting list we now have 38 empty spots with no real optimism of filling. Our waiting list has never been greater, and parents are regularly checking on the possibility of enrolling. To fill these spots, I would need to hire 5 full time teachers and 3 part time teachers. In all of 2023 I was able to hire and retain 1 full time teacher. We continually advertise and offer sign on bonuses of \$1000. We offer referral bonuses to staff and families of \$1000.00 for referring a staff that we are able to hire and retain past the 90 day probationary period. Our average teacher wage exceeds \$20.00 per hour with an extensive benefit list including employer sponsored health insurance, dental insurance, life insurance, 401K, vacation and sick time and free childcare. The cost of this as well as the cost of the unpaid empty spots is passed directly on to parents who are now often paying \$400.00 or more per week for one child. At some point it will not be financially feasible for them to continue to pay for childcare and they will leave the work force. With all of this and a program at only 70% occupancy I believe assistance should be given to stabilize programs that are operating at lower than full capacity at no fault of their own. Without this you are just days or weeks away from learning about new closure of childcare facilities throughout our state. Offering financial aid to expand programs or to start new ones loses sight of the importance of maintaining existing programs in good standing. I hope you do not learn in the future that Heidi's House is one of those programs.

The only real solution I see is to start by stabilizing childcare programs by helping to support the empty spots and by finding real solutions to encourage people to enter the childcare profession. We once were able to pull from our Early Childhood programs at the community college and universities. This is no longer the case as these programs have at best shrunk. I ask you to think beyond this bill and invest in the essential business of childcare in a substantial and long-term way.

Sincerely,

Heidi MacAllister-McDonald