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THE MAINE SENATE
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Testimony in Opposition to Parts SS & TT of LD 2214
Presented to the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
& Health and Human Services
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Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyers, and colleagues on both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and the Health and Human Services Committee, 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 testify in opposition to parts SS and TT of the proposed supplemental budget. These sections of the supplemental budget would roll back long overdue child care initiatives that were approved by the Legislature and the Governor in July.

Maine's child care system is in crisis and it has been for years. Parents cannot afford to find quality, affordable child care with open slots, often languishing for months if not years on waitlists. Child care workers cannot afford to remain in the field they love and providers cannot afford to pay them decent wages. All of this makes the workforce shortage worse for employers and harms our economy in the long run. It's why after years of taking smaller steps to address the crisis and fix the system, the Legislature finally passed a comprehensive child care measure in the budget last session – one that included support for working families, child care workers and providers.

With this historic investment in child care, the state made a commitment to families, child care workers and providers throughout the state. Unfortunately, the proposed supplemental budget before you threatens to undermine the good work we did last year by delaying and limiting the expansion of the Maine Child Care Affordability program. Given the severity and urgency of the crisis, I cannot support these changes.

The Maine Child Care Affordability Program is a subsidy program that provides financial assistance to eligible families to alleviate the cost of child care. To improve access to quality affordable child care, the Maine Legislature expanded eligibility for this program to ease costs for families earning up to 125 percent of the state's median income. This provision was supposed to take effect January 1. Now, the Department has proposed pushing that off to July 1. This comes after the Department sent a notice to families and providers that it will take effect in the Spring of 2024 after rulemaking.

Making working families wait even longer before extending eligibility to them for the child care subsidy will push more families into dire situations where they will need to choose whether

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they can afford to have both adults working. These delays are not only concerning but will also harm everyone.

Amid a shortage of child care workers, the Maine Legislature also expanded eligibility for the Child Care Affordability Program to include the children of child care professionals working at a licensed provider regardless of family income. This was never intended to be a needs-based program rather than an incentive to keep classrooms open and qualified professionals in the field. This supplemental budget proposes changing this expanded eligibility for child care workers into a pilot program.

I don't see what purpose the pilot would serve when it is already clear that we need to provide every incentive possible to get more workers into the child care sector. To me, it's not an issue of need for this subsidy, it's an issue of providing adequate benefits to draw the professionals that Maine desperately needs to a chronically understaffed field.

This is not dissimilar from programs like Doctors for Maine's Future and other programs that seek to attract and retain medical professionals in rural Maine. Though the Department insists that all child care workers would be included in the pilot program, I'm concerned that a pilot program would limit its availability to a small number of providers in the short term, and potentially prevent it from ever truly going into effect in the long term.

More than that, I'm concerned that this change could result in more child care workers leaving the field — child care workers who received a memo in January from the Department that this change was coming and were counting on this benefit.

The result of short-staffing is that most child care providers are caring for fewer kids than their license allows. This is true for both center-based providers and family child care homes. A recent report from ReadyNation found that the gap between licensed capacity and enrollment is 9,442.

The situation in Maine regarding child care is dire. Despite last year's historic investment in child care, providers still have had to close their doors because the law took effect too late and they haven't gotten the necessary relief yet. The last thing we should be doing is going back on our commitments or scaling back relief.

The work we did last year on child care received strong bipartisan support on initial votes, was approved by both your committees and endorsed by a broad coalition of parents, providers, labor groups, business leaders and advocates. With all due respect to the Department and the Administration, I urge you to reject these proposed changes in the supplemental budget regarding child care.

Thank you for your time this morning. I'd be happy to answer any questions.