

Testimony of Hannah Marshall

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees, thank you for your time.

My name is Hannah Marshall, and I am the Executive Director of the Windham and Raymond School Age Child Care Program. We are a non-profit, nationally accredited program, with three centers each licensed to care for up to 75 children. I am here today to testify on behalf of our team of passionate, skilled, and experienced individuals who are dedicated to providing the highest quality care for Maine's children. However, despite their incredible qualifications, they struggle to make ends meet on the wages we can afford to pay them.

The Child Care Educator Wage Supplement has been a saving grace, bridging the gap between what parent fees can cover in wages and what these dedicated individuals truly deserve. In July, however, all stipends were decreased due to an increase in the childcare workforce. While the growth in the workforce is positive, the decrease in wage supplements has left us facing unsafe staffing levels, dangerously high burnout, and a widening gap between wages earned and wages paid.

With the current shortfalls, and particularly if the proposed budget cuts take effect for the coming years, our center will be faced with two choices: lose the majority of our employees, likely leading to the closure of at least one of our centers, or increase parent fees to cover the wage differences. I firmly believe that childcare centers across the state will be faced with the same choices. Maine families cannot afford either of these outcomes, and Maine businesses cannot afford to lose employees. Funding this program strengthens Maine's childcare system, benefiting children, parents, and businesses alike. I strongly urge you to increase funding to bring the wage levels back to what educators were receiving prior to July 2024's decrease.

I would also like to express my support for Part N, Section N-1 of the supplemental budget. Several months ago, when the Child Care Affordability Program was expanded to cover families earning up to 125% of the state median income, I spoke with family after family who were excited and relieved to know that support was coming to help

cover the cost of childcare. Now, I regularly hear from parents who are on the waitlist, desperately hoping for good news and seeking scholarship support while they wait to climb to the top of the list. Despite awarding as many scholarships as possible, our program cannot cover the majority of families we have waiting for the affordability program. It is imperative that state funds are allocated to cover all eligible families.

Finally, I encourage the committee to provide increased funding for the Child Care Employment Award, which, though still in its early stages, has already proven to be absolutely necessary for the state. There are currently 400 employees on the waitlist for this program, and I am soon to be one of them. Without this funding, I, like many others in similar positions, will have to decide whether I can afford to remain in the field. Without this funding, many of us will have to leave the field, taking our experience and dedication with us. If this happens, how many children will lose access to care? How many parents will be forced to quit their jobs? The consequences extend far beyond the individuals on the waitlist.

I urge you to act decisively. Funding these programs is not just about supporting childcare—it's about supporting Maine's future.