



TESTIMONY REGARDING

LD 210 An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Joint Standing Committees on Appropriation and Financial Affairs Committee & Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

February 7, 2025

Senator Rotondo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on LD 210, the Governor's Biennial Budget, *An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027.*

My name is Allyson Lowell, and I am the Chief Clinical Officer at Woodfords Family Services. I am testifying to encourage the continued tuition funding for Special Purpose Preschools as promised by and approved by the legislature one year ago. Woodfords is a nonprofit organization committed to the support and inclusion of individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families. We are a leader in the provision of early intervention and specialized preschool services throughout the state. I also proudly testify as the mother of four children, two of whom received significant early intervention services. Our family will be forever grateful for the services we received and the way they have impacted our children's long term success. One of these children completed his master's in business administration last year and is an administrator at a private university and the other a 98% mainstreamed and thriving 6th grader.

Woodfords, along with a coalition of providers and families, testified to both the AFA and Education Committees in the previous session regarding LD 1309, a bill to require the MDOE to provide equitable funding for Pre-K educational services, similar to the funding provided for K-12 services. Thank you for unanimously supporting and championing this bill. The result was a one-time authorization in the current state budget to pay providers a daily tuition rate which has allowed us to keep our doors open and serve more children. LD 2120 was then passed to ensure that providers would continue to receive a daily tuition rate until a permanent rate could be established. Providers have since worked with MDOE to file a CARES report, a process used to determine tuition reimbursement, based on educational services and instruction provided by each program to the pre-K students they serve.

The impact of your leadership on this issue last session has been profound for Woodfords and children waiting for services.

Five years ago, Woodfords was one of the largest providers of specialized preschool services in the state. We served 140 children across three schools. After years of significant financial losses that threatened the viability of the entire agency, we

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Woodfords FAMILY SERVICES

made the difficult decision to drastically limit enrollment, and no longer take new admissions. We sent a letter to the Commissioner of Education informing the state of our intention to close the program in 2024 unless there was a change in the state funding structure. We closed our wait list of more than 100 families. Our census dwindled to just 35 children. It was heartbreaking.

Since the action of the legislature, we immediately changed course. We reopened admissions and increased our capacity to serve children with autism and other developmental disabilities and have rebuilt our census to 55 preschoolers. We called families who had previously been on our wait list, invited them to tour the program, and enrolled their children in services.

We stabilized our workforce with long overdue pay increases. We gave teachers and support staff up to 25% in wage increases. Applications for open positions more than tripled and we have been steadily bringing on new staff to support newly enrolled students. But, we have a long way to go as a provider community. Our new wait list has 97 children on it.

When the state made the commitment to invest in preschool services in the current budget, we immediately pivoted to increase our service capacity, even before receiving any of the promised funding. This service means a lot to the core of our mission and those we serve. Continued tuition funding will ensure that we can continue to rebuild and provide critical early intervention services.

Providers like Woodfords need funding through tuition in this budget and long-term, consistent funding to stabilize and expand programs for some of the most vulnerable children in our state. This is not just the right thing to do, it is the only thing to do. Early intervention program like Woodfords will not exist if they are not paid by the state for the educational services they are providing. The state is required under FAPE to provide specially designed instruction to preschoolers who are determined eligible and the legislation that you passed needs to remain in place.

Thank you for supporting our advocacy last session, and I urge you to continue to support this effort on behalf of hundreds of children and families across the state.

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