



ALFOND YOUTH & COMMUNITY CENTER



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Testimony of Christine Johnson before
the Committee On Appropriations and Financial Affairs and
the Committee on Health and Human Services
in opposition to
LD 210, the Governor's proposed Biennial Budget

February 24, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, and Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Committees On Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, my name is Christine Johnson and I am the Senior Director of Child & Youth Development at the Alfond Youth & Community Center in Waterville. I am very concerned about the budget cuts to two critical initiatives that help stabilize the childcare sector by investing in our educators:

- Elimination of the Childcare Employment Award program (current investment of \$2.5 million per year) that helps childcare educators pay for their own childcare
- Cutting in half the Childcare Worker Stipends from \$30 million year to \$15 million per year.

My name is Christine Johnson, and I am the Senior Director of Child & Youth Development at the Alfond Youth & Community Center in Waterville. I am deeply concerned about the proposed elimination of the **Childcare Employment Award program**, which helps childcare educators afford their own childcare, and the plan to **slash Childcare Worker Stipends**—already reduced once—from \$30 million to \$15 million a year.

I want to start with a story. Recently, we welcomed two siblings into our program. After a particularly tough day, one of our site coordinators spoke with their mother. She later shared this:

"Shout out to the man at my kids' childcare who noticed my son's actions were coming from trauma without being told about them. Shout out to the man who took a minute to listen to how my child felt and talk him through it. Shout out to the man who spoke to me without judgment for me or my child—who looked me in the eye when he spoke and listened when I expressed how I felt. This is how you handle kids. This is how you handle trauma. What a relief I feel to have my kids in a place they feel safe, that I can trust. Thankful for the changes we've made. And so thankful for the man who I spoke to today. You're a breath of fresh air to a family who has been drowning."

I really want you to take in this mother's words because her story is not unique. So many families in Maine are desperate for help, for stability, for support. And yet, we are here today discussing budget cuts that will make it even harder for them to find it.

Let me be clear: **these programs are not excess spending. They are lifelines.**



The people who choose to work in early education want to be the building blocks of a great start in life. We do this work because we know we can positively affect children, families, and communities. But no matter how passionate we are, we cannot continue if we are not supported. If we want our children to thrive, we must invest in the people who make that possible.

The salary stipends have been essential. For many educators, they are the difference between making rent or falling behind, between staying in this profession or leaving it entirely. Further cuts will push even more talented childcare professionals out of the field, worsening an already fragile system.

We are already losing staff because early education does not provide financial stability. Young, skilled professionals enter the field with enthusiasm but leave when they realize they cannot support themselves—let alone build a future. And when they leave, the impact is immediate: classroom closures, longer waitlists, and, most devastatingly, disruption in the lives of the children who need us most.

And these children **do** need us. Maine has the highest rate of child abuse in the country. That is not just a statistic—it is a crisis. Our kids need consistent, well-trained caregivers who can provide stability. But how can we expect these professionals to remain in the field when we continue pulling away even the small supports they rely on?

The staff member who made such a difference for that family—the one I mentioned earlier—started as an after-school counselor, moved up to a gym teacher, and is now a site coordinator. He has received extensive professional development in youth development, mental health, and trauma-informed care. He is dedicated, talented—and he is considering leaving the field because he's getting married in March to someone with two children, and he simply **cannot afford to stay**.

This is not sustainable. The families and children of Maine deserve better. You will continue to see the state of youth and families worsen in Maine if you continue to cut support for the people doing the most meaningful work. **We must invest in those who care for our kids.** I urge you—oppose these harmful budget cuts.

Our workforce, our families, and our children depend on it.

Thank you.