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Testimony of Representative Holly Eaton introducing

LD 280: An Act to Create Pilot Programs to Provide Tuition Assistance and Grants for Rural Child Care Providers

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Representative Holly Eaton, and I represent House District 15, which includes the island and coastal communities of Deer Isle, Stonington, Brooklin, Tremont, Southwest Harbor, Frenchboro, Swan's Island, Isle au Haut, and Vinalhaven.

I'm here today to present LD 1280, a bill that takes a two-part approach to strengthening the child care system in rural Maine. It proposes the creation of two pilot programs—each with a one-time \$300,000 appropriation—to begin addressing the lack of affordable, accessible child care and the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in our rural counties.

The first pilot program, administered by the Department of Education, provides tuition assistance to rural residents pursuing a degree in early childhood education or a related field. This program is specifically intended for individuals who are ineligible for Maine's free community college initiative, which currently only serves recent high school graduates. That leaves out a large segment of the population—adult learners, working parents, and people already embedded in our rural communities—who want to enter the early childhood workforce but can't afford the cost of education. This program helps remove that barrier.

Grants are capped at \$30,000 per student, but the department has flexibility to award less based on need, potentially serving more than ten students across the pilot. There is no requirement that students attend school in Maine, which is important in rural areas where online and out-of-state programs may be the most accessible option for busy parents or full-time workers.

District 15: Brooklin, Deer Isle, Eagle Island Township, Frenchboro, Southwest Harbor,
Stonington, Swan's Island, Tremont, Isle au Haut, Vinalhaven

The second pilot program, administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, provides grants—also up to \$30,000—to licensed rural child care providers who are looking to open new programs or expand existing ones. Whether it's helping a home-based provider renovate a space or allowing a small center to increase enrollment, this funding addresses real, tangible costs that prevent providers from growing capacity. I've heard time and again from operators across my district that a small grant like this could make all the difference.

As a working parent myself, I know how difficult it is to find and afford child care. And I hear it constantly from constituents—the child care crisis is hitting families hard across the state, but the barriers are even higher in rural communities. There are fewer options, longer waitlists, and more families forced to piece together care or step away from the workforce entirely. LD 1280 is about removing those barriers—about helping people gain the education they need and supporting them in building local solutions.

One of the most exciting things about this bill is how the two programs can work together. Imagine a rural parent who wants to enter the field. With this pilot, they could receive tuition support to take online classes, complete a degree, and then apply for a grant to open their own in-home child care business. What better way to support our rural communities than by empowering local residents to provide high-quality care where it's most needed?

We cannot create new child care slots without the workforce to staff them—and we cannot train new early childhood educators without ensuring there are places for them to work. These two programs were designed to support both ends of the system. They are modest in scale, but highly targeted. And because both are structured as pilots, they give us the opportunity to collect data, learn from communities, and explore scalable solutions for the future.

We talk often about the need to invest in rural Maine, and this bill is exactly that—an investment in our people, our workforce, and the infrastructure that supports families. Without support like this, rural communities will continue to see essential programs reduced or eliminated, simply because there aren't enough providers or staff to keep them going. LD 1280 is one meaningful step we can take to help rebuild rural Maine from the ground up—by supporting those who are ready to learn, ready to lead, and ready to care for the next generation.

I respectfully ask for your support of LD 1280. Thank you for your time and for your continued commitment to strengthening Maine's child care system.

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