

Testimony of Senator Henry Ingwersen
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human Services

LD 1859

An Act to Improve Access to Child Care and Early Childhood Education by
Establishing Regional Resource Hubs

May 15, 2025

Good morning, Representative Meyer, and fellow members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Senator Henry Ingwersen. I represent Senate District 32, the city of Biddeford and the towns of Arundel, Dayton, Hollis, and Lyman. I am here today to present testimony in support of LD 1859, *An Act to Improve Access to Child Care and Early Childhood Education by Establishing Regional Resource Hub*.

We all understand that parents need child care to go to work. We understand that Maine businesses need a stable workforce. We understand that early childhood educators need to make a living wage, or we won't have educators employed at child care centers.

We know that 69 percent of families in Maine with a child under age six have all adults in the household working, which equates to approximately 50,000 children in need of child care.¹ Unfortunately, child care can be difficult to find and afford for too many families. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the average annual cost of child care for an infant in Maine costs over \$12,500. Parents with two children under the age of five must expend an extraordinary percentage of their budget to afford child care.

While affording child care is difficult, finding any available child care is a challenge for most families. We hear of long wait lists and families working part-time or not at all because they cannot find child care.

While there is help online through the state's Child Care Choices website, Maine must provide additional support for young families. Our early childhood system

¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, Children under age 6 with all available parents in work force (5-yr averages) in Maine, retrieved from:
<https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/7317-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-work-force-detailed?loc=21&loc=2#detailed/2/any/false/2545.1095.2048.574.1729.37.871.870.573.869/any/14380.14381>

is a patchwork of programs that cross state departments and funding streams. Parents need help navigating what child care is available that meets their needs. Families may qualify for supports to pay for the care, yet too many parents are unaware of potential financial assistance that could help them lower the cost of child care.

This bill aims to improve how Maine supports the child care needs of families, educators, businesses, and our communities. Maine is one of just three states in the country that does not utilize what is nationally called a “child care resource and referral” service. Maine first created a regional system of supports called Resource Development Centers beginning in 1986, with six regional centers across the state. Over the years, these Resource Development Centers expanded to eleven. In 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services eliminated the contracts that had in large part supported the regional centers.

This bill aims to create a resource that caters to the needs of parents, educators, and the business community in 2025, while also leveraging existing resources. This bill seeks to develop foundational needs related to child care:

Assisting families to find and make informed child care choices:

- Connecting families to resources to pay for child care and with other needed services;
- Increasing the supply and quality of care;
- Establishing and coordinating community and business partnerships; and
- Collecting and distributing child care data to improve supply

Supporting Families

Trained staff who know their communities can help parents meet the unique needs of individual children and families. Information relating to child care quality and the state’s Rising Stars for ME program can help parents make the informed choices about which early childhood program will meet their needs. Staff can also connect parents to other significant public resources that may support the entire family.

Paying for Child Care

Regional hub staff can help parents determine eligibility for programs such as Head Start, the Child Care Affordability Program, public preschool, or tax credits. Parents would receive support navigating financial requirements and program applications.

Increasing Supply of Child Care

Communities, and we as legislators, require better information to support the needs of families and educators. We have all heard about a significant lack of child care in our state. Yet we don't have good data on supply and demand as it relates to child care. Early childhood programs are made up of a mix of public and private entities, ranging from large centers to small home-based programs, to informal family, friend, and neighbor care. They are structured as sole proprietorships, small businesses, or nonprofit organizations. By supporting regional assessments, local communities, supported by the state, can start to address child care needs based on data and community input. Regional hubs can work to increase the workforce and support the coaching and business needs of new child care professionals.

Some communities in the state are moving ahead with local solutions. In Aroostook County, the United Way and the Aroostook County Action Program are working with the business community to support the region's child care needs. In Portland, the United Way and the Greater Portland Chamber of Commerce are working together to create more available child care. As a state, we should work with communities to develop a framework so we can gather data and help create a system that can ultimately improve access to child care, regardless of where you live in Maine.

A strong foundation in the early years is what drives positive outcomes later in life. We must work together to ensure that all children and families have access to the resources they need for a strong start. When children can get a strong early start, and their parents can be fully engaged in the workforce, our communities and economy will also reap the rewards of this investment.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have about this legislation.

CCR&RS ARE THE Eyes and Ears OF AMERICA'S CHILD CARE SYSTEM



Located in 47 states, Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) serve as resource hubs for families, child care professionals and communities.

Below includes services that are most commonly offered:



CCR&Rs help families find quality child care

CCR&Rs help families navigate complex child care systems to ensure that they find high-quality, culturally responsive child care that meets their unique needs. CCR&Rs serve as a single point of access for:

- Child care referrals and consumer education.
- Child care financial assistance programs.
- Child care, Head Start, preschool programs, and out of school time programs.
- Services for children with special needs.



CCR&Rs support early childhood educators and child care programs

CCR&Rs build the supply of quality child care within their state and local communities.

Services offered include:

- Providing mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance at child care programs both in-person and virtually.
- Developing quality improvement plans and supporting the programs through the implementation of the plans.
- Providing business training to child care programs to ensure that their businesses are sustainable.
- Disseminating funding to child care programs.
- Equipping early childhood educators with professional supports, education, resources, and grants to ensure that they are prepared to offer specialized care and education to the children in their care.



CCR&Rs support the whole family

CCR&Rs prioritize placing children in safe, high-quality child care settings and provide additional resources and supports to strengthen the whole family. Services include:

- Connecting families to services such as health insurance, food assistance programs, and child care health and mental health consultants.
- Linking providers to program supports such as assistance with child development screenings and serving as Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) sponsors.



CCR&Rs support child care and development block grant (CCDBG) implementation

CCR&Rs are supported by CCDBG funding and play an essential role in leading and coordinating each state's child care system. In this role, CCR&Rs improve the quality and consistency of services for families, early childhood educators and communities. As a result, most CCR&Rs are vital resources for successful CCDBG implementation. Services Include:

- Delivering training on critical health and safety topics required for child care programs to accept children whose care is being funded by CCDBG dollars.
- Administering child care financial assistance (subsidy) programs to allow low-income families the opportunity to select the best child care program for their family's needs without concern of financial barriers.



CCR&Rs partner with state lead agencies

CCR&Rs have deep experience collaborating with state lead agencies to meet the emergent needs of children, families, and providers. This includes:

- Responding to emergency situations by quickly dispersing personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitization and mitigation supplies, and other resources.
- Sharing meaningful feedback to support the equitable distribution of funding.
- Conducting targeted outreach and raising awareness of grant opportunities.
- Standing up grant application portals.
- Providing technical assistance and resources to child care providers to complete grant applications.
- Executing delivery of funds to child care programs.
- Reporting up-to-date child care data.



CCR&Rs collect, analyze and disseminate data

CCR&Rs maintain relationships with child care programs and families. These personal relationships allow them to maintain accurate, up-to-date and comprehensive child care databases. Their extensive data is used to:

- Identify and seeking supports for underserved populations.
- Pinpointing child care supply and demand needs and mobilizing communities to find solutions to the identified needs.
- Informing important decision-making around topics such as child care funding and licensing regulations at the state and local levels.
- Providing important data that fuels CCAoA's national research and advocacy efforts.



CCR&Rs engage business and community stakeholders

CCR&Rs strengthen communities by building connections within their communities.

- Serving as a connection point between early learning programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, Pre-K, out of school time care and child care communities.
- Facilitating public / private sector partnerships to increase investments in child care.
- Assisting business leaders in implementing policies and supports for their employee's child care needs.

TOP 5 ISSUES

CCR&Rs across the country have reported that the top 5 issues they prioritize in their work are:

- Child Care Business Practices
- Family Child Care Supports
- Health and Mental Health
- Child Care Advocacy
- Racial Equity

To find the CCR&R that services your community, visit **childcareaware.org** or call **800.424.2246**.

