



# Permanent Commission RACIAL, INDIGENOUS & TRIBAL POPULATIONS

**Testimony in Support of LD 1414 and LD 2066**  
***An Act to Support and Sustain Maine's Child Care Workforce***  
***and***  
***An Act to Establish the Child Care Employment Award***

January 21, 2026

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Sam Zuckerman. I am the Policy Coordinator of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. I am here today on behalf of the Permanent Commission's Policy Committee to testify in support of LD 1414, "An Act to Support and Sustain Maine's Child Care Workforce" and LD 2066, "An Act to Establish the Child Care Employment Award."

Maine is in the midst of a child care crisis. High costs and lack of services leave many families or hopeful future families with no options. This is especially true for families of color. At the same time, child care providers are increasingly struggling to make ends meet and to retain staff. These bills would be an important step toward further stabilizing the child care industry and ensuring that every family who needs child care has access to it, by both providing support to families in making child care more affordable and in providing incentives to child care workers, ensuring that there are enough workers to provide these much needed services.

Child care in Maine costs an average of twenty percent of a family's annual income – the average cost per child is \$12,500 but can be as high \$19,000.<sup>1</sup> This disproportionately impacts Maine families of color, whose median income is significantly lower than that of white families.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Health Management Associates. (2021). *2021 Maine Child Care Market Rate Survey*. [https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/2021%20Market%20Rate%20Survey\\_Final.pdf](https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/2021%20Market%20Rate%20Survey_Final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Based on Partnerships for Health analysis of data from the US Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey (Table S1903).

People of color in Maine are also more likely to have irregular work schedules than white Mainers, creating further challenges to getting the care they need.<sup>3</sup>

Lack of access to child care ultimately impacts us all. In 2023, the primary reason that 22,000 Mainers were not working was a lack of child care.<sup>4</sup> Nationally, people of color are more likely to have lack of child care prevent them from working: 28% of Latina women and 28% of Black women report taking unpaid leave to provide child care, compared to 12% of white women.<sup>5</sup> Interruptions in a person's ability to work can then impact their economic stability and career trajectory and ultimately can deepen racial disparities related to wealth and income.<sup>6</sup>

Thank you for your time and attention. We urge you to pass this bill. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>3</sup> Adams, G., & Henly, J.R. (2020). *Child care subsidies: Supporting work and child development for healthy families*. Health Affairs. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20200327.116465/>; Lieberman, H., Agarwal, S., Caldwell, J., & Fulgoni III, V. (2020). Demographics, sleep, and daily patterns of caffeine intake of shift workers in a nationally representative sample of the US adult population. *Sleep*. 43(3).

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, A. (2023, May 9). Child care legislation to benefit Maine workers and families. MECEP analysis of US Census Bureau's household pulse survey. *Maine Center for Economic Policy*.

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<sup>5</sup> Mason, J., & Molina Acosta, P. (2021). *Called to Care: A Racially Just Recovery Demands Paid Family and Medical Leave*. National Partnership for Women & Families; Mabud, R., et al. (2021). *Foundations for a Just and Inclusive Recovery*. National Employment Law Project.

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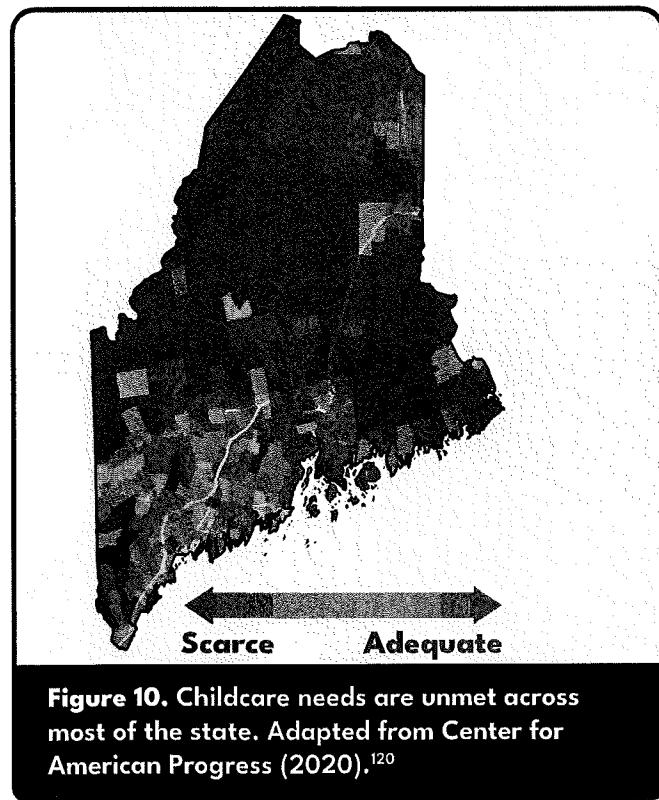
<sup>6</sup> Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. 2024. *State of Racial Disparities Report*. Pages 5-6.

# Child And Elder Care

As a state of working families, Mainers know the importance of high quality, accessible, and affordable care for those we love. Care for our children and aging family members enables us to work and provide the support our families need. Maine currently faces a crisis in the care economy, however, where high costs and lack of services limit access to high quality care across the state. These challenges are further heightened along racial and gender lines, where cultural norms (e.g., around gender) and structural practices (e.g., around parental leave) dictate that women and people of color bear the brunt of caregiving.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, those working in caregiving fields – also often women and people of color – continue to be undervalued and underpaid.<sup>118</sup> Improving access to equitable child and elder care in Maine is essential for families and caregivers.

## Access to Care

Maine currently has 1,843 licensed childcare facilities that can serve as many as 55,843 children. Where these facilities are, however, matters as much as their capacity. Today, 3,251 Maine children go without care because local providers are full or there is no provider where they live.<sup>119</sup> Today, *every county* in Maine contains areas where there are more children in need of care than available services can provide (see Figure 10).<sup>120</sup>



Even in places where child care facilities exist, staffing remains a frequent barrier to operating at full capacity. A recent survey of licensed childcare programs in Maine reported 40% are understaffed, and studies suggest that more than 1,000 childcare workers need to be hired to address Maine's childcare staffing shortage.<sup>121</sup> Growing the childcare workforce is difficult, however, due to issues around affordable housing and low compensation that make it a challenge to attract and retain workers (see more in [Housing](#)). Even as Maine has supported the industry in recent years with supplemental stipends for childcare workers,<sup>122</sup> an average childcare worker in Maine earns a salary of \$34,150 per year.<sup>123</sup> This low compensation is partially caused by a lack of funding for a key federal program, the Child Care Development Block Grant, which supports states with federal dollars to meet the childcare needs of working families with eligible incomes. In Maine, 35% of children come from eligible families, yet only one in ten eligible children receive subsidized care due to chronic underfunding of the program.<sup>124</sup> The issue of staff shortages is further complicated by the lack of childcare professionals in Maine who can provide culturally appropriate and responsive childcare for Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee families.<sup>125</sup>

These challenges are mirrored in the elder care sector as well. In 2021, there were an estimated 24,350 direct care workers in Maine<sup>126</sup> making on average \$13.50 an hour.<sup>127</sup> From 2019 to 2022, Maine saw a significant decline of over 4,000 direct care workers, largely due to pay insufficient to match Maine's growing cost of living. This issue of available workers is even more complicated for those who seek culturally relevant care. A 2020 needs assessment by the University of Southern Maine showed that tribal elders in Maine who need care services preferred to receive care from another Indigenous person. However, due to the lack of staff and general workforce shortages, there were not enough Indigenous caregivers in the workforce to meet these needs.<sup>128</sup>

Low pay for direct care work has ripple effects across Maine's communities. Today, 39% of direct care workers live in low-income households and nearly one-in-four (24%) lack affordable housing.<sup>129</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic also placed direct care workers into situations which negatively impacted their careers and health, further complicating the struggles associated with this work. A lack of adequate protective gear and the necessary face-to-face care required in their jobs caused many direct care workers to contract COVID. By the end of 2020, for example, over 350,000 nursing home staff across the country had contracted COVID and nearly 1,300 died.<sup>130</sup> As a result of these challenges and concerns, between March and May 2020, the number of direct care workers nationally dropped by 280,000 people.<sup>131</sup> Maine saw similar declines in the direct care workforce.<sup>132</sup>

## Affordability of Care

In places that do have available care, affordability remains a barrier for many families. For the 70% of Maine households with children under 6 years old where both parents are in the labor force, childcare is almost always a necessity.<sup>133</sup> These services, however, come with significant costs. While federal standards dictate “affordable childcare costs” should be below 7% of a family’s income,<sup>134</sup> that benchmark is well out of reach for most Maine families, where childcare costs on average around 20% of a family’s annual income. The average cost of care per child in Maine is \$12,500, and can reach as high as \$19,000.<sup>135</sup> This burden falls particularly hard on Maine families of color, whose median income is significantly lower than that of white families in the state,\* and whose irregular work schedules often create even greater challenges in accessing high quality care.<sup>136, 137</sup> These same challenges are mirrored in Maine’s elder care landscape. Today, the state ranks 49th out of 50 in terms of affordability and access to at-home external elder care services, and 45th out of 50 for nursing home cost, with annual costs representing 292% of Mainers’ median household income (see Figure 11). Home care, while presenting some cost savings, does not erase the cost associated with elder care. Nationally, out-of-pocket expenses to care for elderly family members averages around \$7,242 per year.<sup>138</sup> This financial strain differs significantly along racial lines, where for example, Latino caregivers report spending nearly half (47%) of their annual income compared to 18% among white caregivers.<sup>139</sup>

28% of Latina women and 28% of Black women report taking unpaid leave to provide childcare, compared to 12% of white women.<sup>142, 143</sup> This can impact short-term and long-term economic stability and job prospects, and by extension, deepens racial disparities related to wealth and income (see more in Wealth and Income). Additionally, Mainers of color are more likely to work in jobs with poor pay, unpredictable hours, and limited time off, compounding the difficulties of finding affordable care that accommodates irregular schedules<sup>144, 145</sup> (see more in Employment & Workers). Recent studies have shown that declines in the workforce associated with care provision also come at great cost to the state, which loses over \$1.4 billion annually in economic activity.<sup>146, 147</sup>

### QUICK FACTS

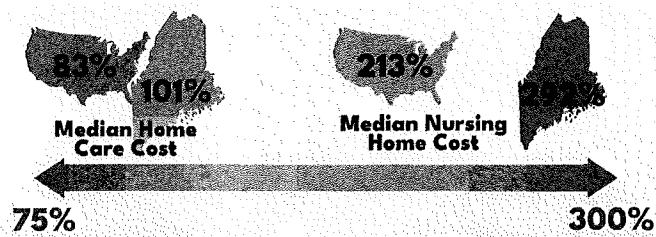
**3,251** Maine children are without childcare due to lack of providers.

**39%** of direct care workers live in low-income households

**In Maine, childcare on average costs of 20% of a family’s annual income.**

**Maine is 49th out of 50 states** in terms of affordability and access to at-home external elder care service.

### Nursing Home and Home Care Cost as Percentage of Senior Median Income



**Figure 11.** Elder care costs in Maine are significantly higher than the national average. Adapted from Reinhard et al, (2023).<sup>148</sup>

## BACKGROUND CONTEXT & THEORY

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## NATIONAL-LEVEL DATA SOURCES

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[National Center for Assisted Living Facts and Figures](#).

[CDC/National Center for Health Statistics Nursing Home Care Data](#)

[Center for the Study of Child Care Employment \(University of California, Berkeley\)](#).

## MAINE-SPECIFIC DATA SOURCES

[Maine Council on Aging Biennial Report \(2022\)](#).

[Maine Office of Child and Family Services Early Childhood Education Data Dashboard](#).

[Maine State Plan on Aging: Needs Assessment](#).

[Bipartisan Policy Center: Child Care Gap Assessment Maine](#).

## Broader Economic Impacts

The high costs and challenges related to accessing child and elder care in Maine hurt working families. In Maine in 2023, lack of childcare was the primary reason 22,000 Mainers were not working.<sup>140, 141</sup> Nationally, people of color are more likely to experience challenges like these, where

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