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Maine Association for the
Education of Young Children

Testimony in Support of LD 1414

An Act to Support and Sustain Maine's Child Care Workforce

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

**Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Health and Human Services
Committee**

1/21/2026

I am Heather Marden, Co-Executive Director of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children, and I am here to testify in strong support of LD 1414, and specifically in support of an amendment that increases Child Care Affordability Program payment rates for infants and toddlers. This amendment is critical to sustaining Maine's child care system, supporting families, and strengthening our statewide economy.

Infant and toddler care is essential but extremely costly to provide and for good reason.

Infant classrooms require the lowest staff-to-child ratios in the child care system—one educator for every four infants and a group size no larger than 8. Staffing accounts for the majority of program costs, making infant care substantially more expensive to deliver than care for preschool-aged children. These costs are fixed and unavoidable, yet current Child Care Affordability payment rates have not kept pace with the true cost of providing high-quality care for Maine's youngest children.

The average annual cost of infant care in Maine ranges from \$11,000 to \$12,000—comparable to or exceeding in-state college tuition. For a family of four earning the median income in Maine (\$114,591), this represents up to 13% of household earnings—nearly double the recommended 7% to budget towards Child Care. While other states may incur higher proportional costs, this still puts a significant strain on many Maine families. These costs coincide with a time when parental earnings are often at their lowest, putting additional financial strain on families.

Roughly 22% of Maine's population lives in a child care desert, where demand far outpaces supply. Infant and toddler slots are the scarcest statewide, with waitlists often exceeding a year. This shortage exists across rural, suburban, and urban communities, leaving families without safe, reliable options and limiting workforce participation.

Programs consistently report losing money on infant and toddler classrooms because subsidy reimbursement rates fall below the actual cost of care. Market-rate-based reimbursements fail to account for staffing realities, facility costs, or quality requirements. Additionally, as more preschool-aged children enroll in publicly funded pre-K programs, private child care programs lose tuition revenue that historically helped offset the high cost of infant care. This growing financial pressure forces programs to cap enrollment or avoid serving infants and toddlers entirely.

As Maine invests in pre-k through public funding, we have, in effect, patchworked a system that is siloed between state departments and has not addressed foundational flaws. The business model for child care does not work under current conditions, and all children—not just certain age groups—deserve access to safe, high-quality care.

Raising subsidy payment rates for infants and toddlers is a critical step in aligning our system to better serve children and families. It demonstrates that we are using state data and research to make informed policy decisions to correct market failures and ensure equitable access.

Raising subsidy rates is an economic and workforce necessity. Higher Child Care Affordability payment rates allow providers to:

- Get closer to covering staffing and facility costs
- Retain qualified educators
- Maintain safe and high-quality learning environments
- Sustain or expand infant and toddler classrooms

The lack of infant and toddler care carries a measurable economic cost. According to the Council for a Strong America, Maine loses approximately \$400 million annually due to insufficient infant and toddler care—through reduced workforce participation, lost earnings, and lower productivity. Public investment that reflects the true cost of care strengthens families, supports businesses, and benefits Maine's economy.

Infant and toddler care cannot be sustained by parent fees alone. Without public investment that reflects the true cost of care, the market will continue to underprovide these critical services. By increasing subsidy rates, LD 1414 supports providers, families, and Maine's economic future while ensuring that all children—especially our youngest—have access to safe, high-quality early care.

For these reasons, I urge you to support LD 1414 and the amendment that establishes higher subsidy payment rates for infants and toddlers. Maine's families, child care providers, and economy cannot afford to wait.

Thank you.