



Testimony in Support of LD 1652

Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and members of the Committee,

My name is Eamonn Dundon, and I am the Director of Advocacy at the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce. I am here today to express our organization's strong support for LD 1652 to adequately support our childcare infrastructure in Maine by making key investments in early childcare workers.

This proposal makes long overdue investments in the workers who have shouldered so much over the last year during the pandemic. Importantly, this bill also has massive implications for the health of our economy. We support this bill because we know that an affordable, accessible and quality early childcare system is crucial to the economic development prospects of our state. Without access to childcare more workers will remain on the sidelines of the economy, imperiling our state's efforts to rebuild from COVID-19.

In both 2020 and 2021 we worked with Starting Strong, a Portland based coalition focused on establishing the building blocks for lifetime learning, to survey our membership and ascertain the impacts of lack of childcare on the business community in our region. We surveyed businesses from small storefronts with a handful of workers up to some of the largest employers in the state and the results were resoundingly clear: a lack of childcare is a severe impediment to hiring, training, and retaining employees and the current programs in place are not enough to address this overwhelming need.

61% of our members report that their employees have trouble finding childcare. This translates into very real business impediments that undermine our economic development efforts at the state and local level, with 75% of our members saying that their employees experience unplanned work absences due to lack of childcare, and nearly 50% saying that lack of childcare has caused issues when it comes to employee retention. Ranking even higher than affordability or location, 95% of our members who identified lack of childcare as a problem for their business gave availability as the largest barrier.

We cannot begin to address issues around programmatic availability unless we invest in the most critical component of any system: people. Maine childcare workers have been undercompensated for decades, despite possessing the degrees and expertise needed to care for our youngest residents. This has led to high turnover and burnout among these professionals, further limiting childcare slots and presenting many challenges to those looking to open or expand a childcare program.

Along with our partners at Starting Strong and the United Way we continue to pursue every available avenue, whether it be municipal, state, or federal, to improve access to childcare in Maine. We will continue to pursue those opportunities, but this bill represents the best chance to make these critical investments in our childcare workers and lay the groundwork for healthy educated futures for our young people, sustainable careers for our childcare workers, and predictability for Maine families so parents can fully participate in the economy while remaining confident that their children are in good hands.

For these reasons we ask that you support these important investments in workers who do so much to hold up our economy and Maine families. Thank you for your time today, and, on behalf of the Portland Regional Chamber I ask that you please support LD 1652.