

**TESTIMONY BY BEN GILMAN, GENERAL COUNSEL, MAINE STATE CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE AND MEMBER, READYNATION
BEFORE THE INNOVATION, DEVELOPMENT, ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT
AND BUSINESS COMMITTEE
IN SUPPORT OF L.D. 1652 “AN ACT TO BUILD A CHILD CARE SYSTEM BY
RECRUITING AND RETAINING MAINE’S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS
WORKFORCE”**

9:30 a.m. Tuesday May 11, 2021

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business, I am Ben Gilman, Legal Counsel at the Maine State Chamber of Commerce and a member of the business organization ReadyNation. The Maine State Chamber of Commerce is also proud to be a co-leader of the MaineSpark Coalition that is dedicated to achieving the state’s educational attainment goal that 60 percent of Maine adults have a credential of value by 2025.

I am pleased to be here today to testify in favor of LD 1652, “An Act to Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine’s Early Childhood Educators Workforce.”

One of the pandemic’s many lessons is that accessible, affordable, high-quality child care is critically important - especially to Maine’s business community. The widespread shutdowns last spring halted or greatly limited the work of businesses all across our state. But even when businesses reopened, many employees could not return to work or return full time. With their children’s child care centers and schools closed or with limited hours of operation, many parents had to stay home and care for their kids.

If workers can’t work because they lack child care, that’s a barrier to each business’ ability to operate.

I can also share with this Committee that as a father of four kids ages 6 to 16, I have lived, and continue to live, the experiences of working from home while all four kids are trying to learn remotely; and I know the struggles of finding accessible and affordable child care.

The Maine State Chamber of Commerce has a vested interest in helping to support Maine’s child care sector and we believe this bill is a priority, and a good start to helping build and sustain workers in this critical employment sector. The Maine State Chamber of Commerce

is fully at this table. I was a member of DECD's working group that drafted Maine's 10-year economic strategy and plan, which, for the first time, includes "building world class child care." Maine State Chamber of Commerce CEO Dana Connors and some of our board members served on Governor Mill's Economic Recovery Committee, which made supporting child care – and specifically the child care workforce - one of its top priorities.

You will hear other's testify about the low wages currently paid to child care workers. Given that, we know that Maine's child care workforce experiences a high turnover rate. Child care programs cannot offer competitive wages without charging families more - which families cannot afford. The wage stipends in Speaker Fecteau's bill will help supplement the low wages and begin to support workforce retention.

Speaker Fecteau's proposal also supports the early childhood education workforce through multiple pathways of skill development, training, and educational opportunities. This includes expanding early childhood programs at Career and Technical Education Centers across Maine which offers students the opportunity to build and recruit an early childhood workforce that has a foundation of relevant and applied learning to enhance their skills. This also sets students up for future post- secondary and workplace successes.

In addition, this bill sets up scholarships and apprenticeships – two proven tools to strengthened an economic sector in need of more workers. As these programs are developed, we hope they are done in such a way as to recruit diverse workers. And we believe that training and education opportunities for the early childhood workforce should be flexible and transferable across our higher education, adult education, and professional development programs that offers a wide range of professional development opportunities – from badging, to credentialing, to AA, BA and Masters' degrees. Coordinating across our educational settings allows for greater access in educational attainment and skill development, as well as reduces redundancy in training.

And, thanks to the most recent federal package of relief funding to Maine, that includes \$118 million specifically to support child care, we have the resources to begin this work in earnest.

We all hope that one day soon Maine's economy will return to where it was pre-pandemic. When that happens, it also means we will return to an economy in which 73 percent of all children under age 6 will have all parents in the workforce. That means we need a strong child care sector to support working parents, and, as importantly, nurture, care for and teach Maine children, therefore, helping each of them to grow into his or her fullest potential.

We thank Speaker Fecteau for putting this proposal forward and hope that it's the beginnings of addressing Maine's child care challenges. Doing so will support a more productive workforce and economy, both now and in the future.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.