



**Sagadahoc County  
Sheriff's Office**

**Joel A. Merry, Sheriff  
Brett Strout, Chief Deputy**

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752 High Street, Bath, Maine 04530  
Telephone (207)443-8529 Fax (207)443-8224

**TESTIMONY BY SAGADAHOC COUNTY SHERIFF JOEL MERRY 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 Joel Merry, I am pleased 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."

I offer my remarks as a member of the national anti-crime organization Fight Crime: Invest In Kids, as Sagadahoc County Sheriff, as someone who spent four years working at my local YMCA in Bath, and as a former member of the Board of Directors for the Bath Area Family YMCA.

I do not profess to be an expert on child care. There are others participating in this hearing today to do that. But I can tell you as someone who worked along-side them that child care workers are amazing individuals, they truly do God's work, and then are grossly underpaid.

My own research preparing for this conversation, and for a conversation with people I know who are in this field, I found that in 2018 wages for Maine child care workers ranged from \$11.55 an hour to \$12.02 an hour, or about \$25,000 a year on average. (Source: [https://stats.bls.gov/oes/current/oes\\_me.htm#\(4\)](https://stats.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_me.htm#(4)))

I wonder how hard it is to hire and retain good workers at these salary levels. And I think about that in comparison to the field I know well: law enforcement. In 2018 the average salary of a police officer in Maine, while less than the national average, was \$49,840. (Source: [https://stats.bls.gov/oes/current/oes\\_me.htm#\(4\)](https://stats.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_me.htm#(4)))

They are worth every penny. Our child care workers should be just as valued.

You will hear Maine law enforcement leaders strongly embrace **high-quality** early learning programs in all forms – child care, PreK/preschool, Head Start, Early Head Start and home visiting. That's because we

know from our own experiences what the research and evidence show – getting all children, and especially at-risk children, on the right start in life can reduce later crime.

I would like to offer you my perspective on how high quality early care and education is connected to safer communities and crime.

I have been involved in law enforcement for my entire career, and I have seen how the lack of properly supervised activities can lead kids into crime-laden environments. I have listened to testimonies in courtrooms by too many of our young people as they are sentenced to incarceration. I have heard, over and over: if there had only been some positive influence in their lives, their story might have a different ending.

Government's most fundamental responsibility is to protect the public safety. There is no substitute for tough law enforcement. But once a crime has been committed, lives have already been shattered. Those of us on the front line in the fight against crime understand that we will never be able to arrest and imprison our way out of the crime problem. We can save lives, hardship – and money – by investing in programs that can keep children from growing up to become criminals in the first place.

Today, I'm here to tell you that high-quality early learning programs are one of the crime prevention programs in which we should be increasing our investments.

Many in this room know what the research tells us about what a critical time the first five years of life is for a child's physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

What is equally important, but less well known, is that quality early learning programs can also significantly reduce the chances of a child growing up to become a criminal.

A study of the Chicago Child-Parents Centers shows these facts. These centers provided school readiness programs to 100,000 preschoolers from some of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods over the course of 30 years. At age 18 the study examined outcomes for these children and matched those outcomes with a peer group of similar kids not enrolled in the Centers. The study showed that kids who did not receive quality early learning programs were **70 percent more likely to have been arrested for a violent crime by age 18**. By age 24 the now young adults who were in the Child Parent Center program as children were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail.

Furthermore, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers cut the abuse and neglect of children in the program in half compared to similar children not in the program. The reduction of abuse and neglect is significant in itself, but it is also compelling because of the potential impact on future criminal behavior. Studies show that children who are

abused or neglected are more likely to be arrested as juveniles, and are more likely to commit crimes as adults, than children who were not abused or neglected.

We only achieve these outcomes when programs are high-quality.

Three key indicators of quality are teacher education and on-going training, low student-to-teacher ratios and having a consistent care giver in the life of a young child. All of these factors need resources.

So taking steps to attract more dedicated professionals into the field as early educators, and helping to build and retain this critical workforce are much needed measures. I appreciate Speaker Fecteau bringing this bill forward.

The need for more high-quality child care for working parents is great. I hope this committee can come to a bi-partisan agreement on how best to support a workforce which is critical to Maine working parents, and thus to many segments of our economy. And is also a proven crime reduction strategy.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my comments.