

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and Esteemed Members of the Committee On Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business:

My name is Kimberly Simmons, I am from Portland Maine and I am testifying in support of LD 1652 - An Act To Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce. I am a sociologist, familiar with the literature on work and family, and a mother myself.

Last week, I testified in support of LD 1559, in hopes that Maine will put some muscle behind developing a meaningful Paid Family and Medical Leave system. Access to affordable, accessible, high quality childcare is another important piece of legislation to support working families -- living wages, and reasonable, predictable but flexible working hours are also essential. When any of these elements are missing, families risk shifting into terrible and sometimes dangerous bargains.

Stories in the book Forgotten Families by Jody Heymann stands out in my memory, although I read it many years ago. She details the strategies of domestic workers trying to take care of their own families while meeting the strict demands of employers. One mother brought her toddler with her, and tied her to the leg of the dining room table within the home she was working, to keep her contained. All day the very young child was simply alone, unable to really move, just tied to a table. Other families instead pulled older children from school to care for the youngest in the neighborhood or extended family. Now called "parentification", the expectation that an 8, 9 or 10 year old serve as primary caregivers for toddler and preschool children is a kind of neglect but often done in hopes of preventing even worse outcomes. Other families simply leave very young children at home, sometimes locked in rooms, praying they will be safe while the parent earns money. These stories have haunted me during the Covid related mandatory quarantines, remote schooling and closed childcare centers, while so many mothers work in frontline, low wage industries. The gap in childcare likely has meant these same strategies are employed in Maine, today. We know chronic absenteeism has been a significant problem in schools this year, particularly in Portland and Lewiston.

This book was written in the wake of the design of TANF block grants, and programs throughout the world that were pushing mothers of very young children into the very low wage work force. This "surplus labor market" helped keep labor cheap, and all too often the prices that were paid were relatively invisible to policy makers and community members. As Maine prepares to require citizens receiving unemployment insurance to actively look for work, despite the lack of childcare available this summer, I am reminded that the divisions among us can serve to dehumanize workers and their

families. We have elected Democrats to guide us in the Legislature, Governor's office, and Presidency to try to reframe the choices before us -- we cannot repeat the mistakes of the past which treated primary Black and Brown mothers and their children as undeserving of safe family lives. We cannot ignore the needs of rural families, 20% of whom are estimated to live in [childcare deserts](#), but still need to work for money to pay for food, housing, clothing. We should not consign any of us to the horrible decision of risking the safety of a 3 year old home alone or a 3 year old left without lunch or dinner -- and this is not hyperbole, we know that approximately a quarter of Maine children are food insecure.

The evidence is overwhelming -- Maine needs to consider the needs of families in all of our public policy. We need to address all of the care needs, in a systemic and strategic way, taking into account the actual needs and preferences of those providing and receiving care rather than presuming care is always available but that wage labor is not.

For far too long, a few voices claiming to represent business have overshadowed the work being done by family owned small business, independent entrepreneurs and workers of all kinds -- we have lacked a trade association for working mothers and frankly are often far too busy to add testifying on a bill at an unknown time to our list. The data - as has been shared for years by the Maine Children's Alliance, and others, is uncontested. We know that families are suffering. What we haven't known is how to reframe this suffering from that of our own making to a public problem we can better solve with collective effort. We must remember our dependence on "essential workers" and refuse to disregard their children's needs in order to meet our own.

I urge you to invest in Child Care in Maine, and all the care professions!

Sincerely,

Kimberly Simmons, PhD
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