



May 11, 2021

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business,

I join you today on behalf of the Maine Women's Lobby. For over forty years, the Maine Women's Lobby has advocated for public policy which increases the health, wellness, safety, and economic security of Maine women and girls, with a focus on the most marginalized populations and communities. As proud members of the Right From the Start Coalition, we are here **in support of LD 1652, "An Act To Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce,"** and thank Speaker Fecteau for sponsoring this important bill.

When I began to draft my testimony for this bill, I looked at our organization's testimony for this bill's predecessor, from May of 2019. The first line was: *"Put simply, we are in a childcare crisis."*

**In the 24 months since, that childcare crisis has turned into a full-blown economic crisis.**

You'll hear today about the connections between affordable, quality childcare and a thriving economy, a vibrant workforce, and the brain development and nurturing of the youngest Mainers. You'll hear how nearly one in four Mainers lives in a childcare desert<sup>1</sup>, and how there has been a 37 percent decrease in the number of childcare facilities in Maine in the last decade.<sup>2</sup> While all of that remains true, I want to focus specifically on the intersection of this bill with gender equity.

**In the last 14 months, the pandemic has resulted in generation-defining job losses among women in Maine.** The Maine Dept. of Labor has reported a gender disparity in job losses every month of the pandemic, and at the national level it has been even higher. One of the key factors is that **women are far more likely to leave the job force due to essential caregiving responsibilities.**<sup>3</sup> The closure of schools and childcare centers and shortages among the essential direct care workforce mean that families must make hard – and sometimes terrible – choices. The pandemic simply exposed what was already happening with our care infrastructure: a decline in availability of childcare is underway,

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<sup>1</sup> Hamm, K., Malik, R., Schochet, L., Novoa, C., Workman, S., & Jessen-Howard, S. (2018, December 6). America's Child Care Deserts in 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2018/12/06/461643/americas-child-care-deserts-2018/>

<sup>2</sup> Maine Public. (2019, June 24). Out of Reach: Maine's Child Care Affordability Problem. Retrieved from <http://projects.mainepublic.org/child-care-deep-dive>

<sup>3</sup> MECEP analysis of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2014-2018 5-Year Estimates for Maine, retrieved by Sarah Austin (2020).



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and women fill the gaps, resulting in a purge of women from the workforce. This can mean a loss of income for the household, a loss of access to employment-based health insurance, and a lifetime loss of income which can have significant impacts on retirement planning.

At the same time, the childcare workforce is almost entirely women, and they are some of the most underpaid and undervalued workers in Maine. The mean salary for a childcare worker in the U.S. is \$25,510 a year,<sup>4</sup> while the livable wage for an adult with one child in Maine is nearly twice that at \$53,302.<sup>5</sup>

**This circumstance is a microcosm of our economy: our social structure cannot function without these truly essential providers, and they are overwhelmingly women, disproportionately women of color<sup>6</sup>, and being asked to perform essential functions on less than a livable wage. We can do better.**

An issue this complex will require a complex and systemic response. LD 1652 offers one important solution: to address the workforce side of the equation. While ensuring that this essential childcare workforce has access to training and fair compensation is a worthwhile end alone, bolstering the workforce will also create stability in the availability of childcare, which in turn will support women's engagement in the workforce.

This bill addresses a key part of this crisis, and we hope you will vote **'yes' on LD 1652.**

Sincerely,

Destie Hohman Sprague, Executive Director  
Maine Women's Lobby / mainewomen.org

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (May 2017). *Occupational Employment and Wages: Child Care Workers*. Retrieved August 11, 2020 from <https://www.bls.gov/oes/2017/may/oes399011.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Living Wage Calculator for Maine. (2020). Retrieved August 13, 2020, from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/23>

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research, & OXFAM. (2016). *Undervalued and Underpaid in America: The Deck Is Stacked against Millions of Working Women*.