Testimony on Behalf of the United Ways of Maine in Support of:

LD 552: An Act To Provide Funding for Home Visiting Services
LD 977:  An Act To Improve Child Care in the State
LD 1054: An Act To Provide Funding for Head Start Services
LD 1267: An Act To Assist Working Families with Young Children

By Alysia Melnick, Director of Public Policy, United Way of Greater Portland

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of accessible, comprehensive, quality early care and education services and family supports. My name is Alysia Melnick, and I am speaking today for the ten United Ways across the state of Maine.

United Ways throughout Maine are committed partners in improving the educational outcomes of Maine children and supporting the success of Maine families. We support a comprehensive early care and education system, including Head Start, home visiting, and quality childcare. Research shows that regular contact with caring adults builds the architecture of the brain and sets our children up for a successful future. Supportive early relationships and nurturing, stimulating experiences with parents, educators, caregivers and home visitors ensure children have the skills to become tomorrow's workers, caregivers, taxpayers, and community-minded citizens.

Investing in early childhood education is also fiscally responsible. Ensuring children have strong foundations and that family issues are identified early and addressed pays off in both the short and long terms: by increasing the health and development of our children, reducing spending on more intensive, downstream interventions, and by supporting the success of our economy through a healthy, skilled, and productive future workforce – something Maine desperately needs in light of our status as the oldest state in the nation.

Funding high quality early childhood education provides taxpayers with returns of at least 7-10 percent per year for every dollar invested, based on reduced costs for remedial education, health, justice system expenditures and the tax revenues generated by increased earnings. These early childhood care and education investments can be further maximized by focusing on the most vulnerable children – children living in poverty and children with special needs. When we focus on early childhood, we start our children on the path to school success and, in turn, ensure the greatest chance for long term stability, independence and success.

Head Start is one critical part of a comprehensive early care and education system. Head Start serves children age three to age five in families with incomes below the federal poverty level or children from families receiving public assistance. Head Start also offers transportation, home visits, literacy and vocational supports for families, and connection to other community resources. These programs advance school readiness, increase educational achievement, improve health outcomes, strengthen parenting and reduce the likelihood that a child will end up in the justice system. Currently, only 30% of eligible children in Maine receive Head Start or Early Head Start.

2 Id.
**Home Visiting** programs provide an important first step in preventing child abuse and neglect and increasing child safety by helping at-risk families with parenting education in their own home. These services help parents build a solid foundation for their child to thrive in that critical window in the first few years of life to optimize development and provide the best chance of future success. Home visiting services build on the crucial parent-child relationship and by strengthening parents’ skills, addressing risk factors and, when necessary, connecting them with community resources, including job training, substance abuse treatment programs, mental health services, education, domestic violence shelters, housing assistance and quality childcare.

Again, these services are also fiscally responsible. Parent education and family supports save treatment and intervention dollars and produce important outcomes, including reduced child abuse and neglect rates, increased educational success, reduced exposure to tobacco smoke, and increased family self sufficiency. Family home visiting programs have been shown to produce a tremendous return on investment, with every dollar spent producing as much as $9.50 in return.

**Child Care Development funds** are another crucial piece of the system. These funds help low-income families afford safe, educational, quality child care so they can enter or remain in the workforce. The program also improves the quality of child care, and promotes coordination among early childhood development and afterschool programs. Low-income should have access to safe, stimulating, educational environments in which to place their children while they work. It makes sense for children, parents, employers, and the community at large.

Please invest in Head Start, home visiting, and child care. These programs help children succeed and prevent more costly downstream public expenditures to address health issues, educational and developmental delays, substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse. These programs improve children’s lives, allow parents to participate in the workforce, and represent sound investments in our state’s future.

The United Ways in Maine have been and will continue to be committed partners in supporting early care and education in our communities. United Ways, however, cannot alone provide to sustain funding for these vital early childhood care and education programs and services. United Ways can supplement, but not supplant, public sector investment in these programs. We recognize that you and your colleagues face difficult funding decisions, but for all of the reasons stated above, we ask you to support strong investments in our children.

Thank you for your time, leadership and service.

Alysia Melnick, Director of Public Policy
United Way of Greater Portland; amelnick@unitedwaygp.org

*On behalf of the ten United Ways of Maine*

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3 Families served by Maine Families Home Visiting report higher rates of immunizations (92% vs. 73%) improved home safety for 100% of participating families, and of those families involved with Child Protective Services upon referral, 95% had no further substantiated allegations of abuse or neglect during participation. [www.mainefamilies.org](http://www.mainefamilies.org)