

May 29, 2020

Children's Cabinet
c/o the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future
181 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0181

Dear Commissioners Lambrew, Fortman, Makin, Liberty and Sauschuk,

As members of the Children's Cabinet Early Childhood Advisory Council, we thank you for your leadership during this extremely challenging and unprecedented time for our state and our nation. We appreciate the steps that each of your agencies has taken to support children, youth and struggling families.

From providing direction to teachers, school counselors, and administrators to quickly move students to virtual learning to supporting a swift transition to reimbursing for telehealth services, you and your staff have had to adapt to new ways of operating and supporting schools, health care providers and families. We appreciate your quick adoption of federal waivers to protect families from losing basic supports, such as food assistance and health care, and the processing of tens of thousands of applications for unemployment insurance from parents who had lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

Unfortunately, the needs and challenges of families in this state continue to grow. Given the incredible challenges faced by families with young children and programs serving these families, we felt we had a responsibility in our role as an advisory council to weigh in with some policy priorities and recommendations for the Cabinet.

We write to urge the Children's Cabinet to use funding from the \$1.25 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund provided through the CARES Act to address the growing needs and challenges of families with young children. We believe immediate steps are needed to protect and maintain our early care and education system in Maine and to make key investments to support the health and well-being of Maine's young children and their families.

We ask that you consider prioritizing the following areas for support and relief:

- **Provide further financial support for Maine's child care programs:** The impact of the pandemic on our already fragile early care and education system has been significant. We are extremely concerned that many child care programs who were already operating on tight margins and already faced challenges recruiting and maintaining staff will be unable to weather this storm. Data from the Office of Child and Family Services shows that about half of the state's programs were closed at the beginning of April, while the other half stayed open, often with significantly fewer children in their programs, to care for the children of essential workers. Many programs are re-opening to align with the state's phased in re-opening plan in order to meet the needs of working parents. However, as they plan for re-opening, a good number of programs find

themselves operating at significant deficits. Because parents are concerned about the health risks of putting their children in group settings, many are operating with fewer children and without the ability to lower all of their operating and overhead costs. All programs will face increased costs for cleaning and protecting the health and well-being of children. One of the Council members from Aroostook County explained that the three child care programs run by her employer Aroostook Community Action Program plan to open in June and will likely be at full capacity. They have calculated that they will be operating at an approximately \$4000 per week deficit. ACAP is currently determining how they will cover these costs over a short period of time, but most child care programs are not affiliated with larger nonprofits and cannot afford to operate at a deficit for very long or if at all.

We know that the Office of Child and Family Services has been working diligently to respond to concerns of child care providers across the state. We were extremely pleased with the Office of Child and Family Services' ability to quickly provide funding from the increase in the Child Care Development Block Grant to all licensed programs. However, even with an additional round of grants on track to go out in the next month, we are significantly concerned that this funding will not be sufficient to protect our existing child care system and we fear that many existing programs will struggle to reopen and stay open throughout the summer, into the fall and beyond to meet the needs of families. We believe that another round of funding for child care programs will be needed to stabilize the child care system. There may be an opportunity to address a shortage of early childhood educators in the state by using funding to train dislocated workers to enter the early childhood field.

We urge the Children's Cabinet to use CARES Act funding to support programs to ensure that we maintain our current child care system that is needed to provide quality care to young children and support families to get back to work.

- **Increase behavioral health services for children and their families as well as support for programs caring for young children.** Families across the state are struggling. Stress and anxiety levels are at an all-time high. Families, particularly those who were already struggling with economic insecurity or health issues, are facing significant challenges as they worry about how they are going to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. Parents of children with special needs are overwhelmed as the support they receive to care for their children's behavioral or physical health needs is now much more limited.

We are extremely concerned about children who are home in unsafe environments with little interaction with other adults in the community. We fear that the rate of child abuse and neglect is higher than what is being reported and could be on the increase as a result of the stress and anxiety being placed on families at this time.

We appreciate the expansion of vital telehealth services for those seeking mental health services and the efforts by DOE to support special education teachers to continue to serve children with special needs as best they can. We know from staff at DHHS and DOE that you are keenly aware of these growing challenges and we understand that the necessary constraints of our current safer at home order make it more difficult to meet the growing mental health needs and challenges facing families across the state. We believe that the funding through the CARES Act provides an opportunity to better meet the increased needs for behavioral services as a result of the pandemic.

We urge the Children's Cabinet to make immediate investments in the state's behavioral health services to ensure that children and families can access needed services, either via telehealth or in person (when appropriate).

- **Support parents to access available child care and subsidies through improved technology and coordination.** A new collaboration between Maine Roads to Quality and Maine Association of the Education of Young Children has supported the development of an on-line resource to provide families up-to-date details about available child care. This service has been critical for essential workers seeking child care for their children during the pandemic. Maine does not have a traditional resource and referral service to help parents find available child care in their communities. While the Child Care Choices website provides helpful information about child care programs at the community level, it does not include needed information about available slots, making it challenging for parents to identify open slots in their area.

We urge the Children's Cabinet to use federal funding to support OCFS to update the Child Care Choices website to capture up-to-date information from child care programs about available care in a streamlined and easy to access way. In addition, federal funding could be used to bring the application for the child care subsidy program on-line which is critically important at this time when we are encouraging everyone to do as much as possible on-line and from their homes.

- **Address food insecurity by supporting, strengthening and expanding the summer meals programs.** The summer meals program plays a critical role in providing nutritious meals for children during the summer months. With concerns about protecting the health and safety of children, summer meals programs face new challenges this year and some are concerned about how they are going to provide meals to children in their communities. However, families need access to these programs now more than ever. We appreciate DOE's tremendous work to support schools to provide school meals to children following the move to virtual learning. We understand that the state is waiting for another waiver approval to continue provide meals. We are hopeful that the state will receive approval. With or without this waiver, CARES Act funding could be used to provide additional support to summer programs to ensure that they are able to meet the nutritional needs of children and when appropriate to support programs to provide structured activities to engage children physically and emotionally.

We urge the Children's Cabinet to use CARES Act funding to ensure that summer meals programs can operate this summer in a safe and effective way to address growing food insecurity for children across the state.

We believe it is critical that we make key investments with CARES Act funding to address the significant ramifications of this pandemic on our child care system and the health and well-being of struggling families with young children across the state.

We thank you for considering these recommendations. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to Colleen Quint, chair of the Children's Cabinet Early Childhood Advisory Council at cquint@alfondscholarshipfoundation.org.

Sincerely,

Colleen Quint, Chair, Alford Scholarship Foundation
Jennifer Beck, John T Gorman Foundation
Annie Colaluca, Bath Area Family YMCA & Maine AEYC
Chrissie Davis, Bouncing Bubbles Child Care & Family Child Care Association of Maine
Honorable Jeremy Fischer, Maine Early Learning Investment Group
Rita Furlow, Maine Children's Alliance
Casey Henderson, Educare's Ambassador Program
Donna Karno, University of Maine, Farmington
Dana-Michelle LaPlante, The Aroostook Medical Center
Dr. Stephen Meister, MaineGeneral & Maine Association of the Academy of Pediatrics
Honorable Rebecca Millett, Maine Senate
Honorable Teresa Pierce, Maine House of Representatives
Sue Powers, Aroostook County Action Program & Head Start Association
Honorable Matt Pouilot, Maine Senate
Honorable Heidi Sampson, Maine House of Representatives
Sasha Shunk, Shunk Child Care and Family Child Care Association of Maine