TO: The Honorable Gabriela M. Mosquera, Chair

 Members, Assembly Women and Children Committee

FROM: MJ O’Leary, Chair

 League of Women Voters of New Jersey, Women and Family Issues Committee

DATE: June 8, 2022

RE: **Testimony in Support of Child Care Bills: A1469, A4176, A4177, A4178 and A4179**

I am testifying on behalf of The League of Women Voters of New Jersey (LWVNJ), Women and Family Issues Committee. We strongly support the child care bills before the committee today. LWVNJ is a statewide organization that works on vital issues of concern to its members and the public. We envision a democracy where every person has the desire, right and ability to participate fully without barriers. We also particularly believe that a more perfect democracy empowers and supports full engagement from women and all people with diverse backgrounds, race, socioeconomic status, age, work style, marital status, gender identity and belief systems. Access to safe, affordable, high quality childcare is a backbone of our democracy. Not only does it ensure that every child has the chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated, but it enables parents or primary caregivers to work, to make ends meet, to get ahead and to plan for one’s best, imagined future. Democracy flourishes and we all benefit when families can work, and children can learn.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has increased awareness around the importance of child care, it did not create the child care crisis. It exposed weaknesses that have long been ignored. The cost and inaccessibility of child care is often a barrier. Realities like child care deserts, lack of infant care, and the high cost of care pushes caregivers, most of whom are women, out of the workforce by necessity. The ability to work and raise a family is simply out of reach for some New Jerseyans. A lack of child care also deprives children of the significant, life-long advantages that early childhood education confers. To be sure, the children and families who suffer the most are those with lower socioeconomic means or less ability to travel longer distances to obtain care. Additionally, child care staff is among the lowest paid in our workforce. This makes it difficult for providers to attract and retain qualified individuals who can deliver the quality care that children and families need. The bills under consideration today take important steps toward bolstering and reimagining New Jersey’s child care system, making it more accessible, affordable, higher quality and equitable.

Please consider our summary in support of the bills below. It highlights how each contributes to creating more equitable avenues for full participation in society.

**A1469 – Establishes a refundable tax credit for certain child care staff who have direct responsibility for children**.

The difficulty in hiring and retaining child care staff is a continuing crisis. Without sufficient staff, programs have been forced to downsize despite parent demand. This bill takes steps to remediate the problem and to support the valuable work that child caregivers provide.

**A4176 – Expands eligibility for child care assistance to 300 percent of Federal Poverty Level.** New Jersey is an extremely expensive state for families to afford. Child care and housing costs are higher here than in other states. New Jersey’s existing child care assistance program that provides child care subsidies for families with annual incomes under 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) does not go far enough to help New Jersey families who struggle with child care costs. Legal Services’ annual report on the true cost of living in New Jersey finds that 300 percent FPL - $83,250 for a family of four - is the minimum income needed for a family to meet basic needs. Expanding eligibility for child care assistance to 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level would go a long way in making childcare more affordable to people in New Jersey who struggle to make ends meet.

**A4177 - Extends payment of child care subsidies based on enrollment**. One of the most important actions that New Jersey took with its federal funds to address the child care crisis caused by the pandemic, was to pay child care subsidies based on child enrollment rather than attendance. The pandemic further destabilized an already fragile system. Child care programs were initially closed, then reopened with limited capacity, significantly reducing the number of children that a program could serve. At the same time, the cost of running a program – rent, utilities, staffing and other fixed costs – remained the same. Paying child care subsidies at a fixed date of enrollment gives programs much-needed stability.

**A4178 – Establishes Department of Early Childhood**. Programs for young children, prenatal to age 6, are provided across several state departments in New Jersey. Yet the development of state-funded preschool across the country and the growing awareness of the critical importance of the early years, prenatal to age 6, have caused other states to examine whether services for young children should be coordinated under one umbrella. As a result, several states have created new departments to consolidate and organize services more effectively. Georgia, Massachusetts and Maryland have had departments focused on early childhood for many years. More recently, New Mexico and Oregon have created new early childhood departments. While the structure varies from state-to-state, the goals are consistent: to coordinate services more effectively and efficiently, make services more accessible for families and to improve the quality of early care and education. Having New Jersey’s programs housed in one department could ensure a unified, aligned early care and education system for all young children, which is why LWVNJ supports this proposed legislation.

**A4179 – Creates the Thriving by Three Initiative**. Child care for infants and toddlers continues to be the most difficult for parents to find and for programs to provide. Designed as a competitive grant program, A4179 provides incentives to programs, whether center, home, Head Start or school-based, to develop more child care for infants and toddlers. It provides one-time grants to renovate facilities so that programs can meet licensing regulations for children under age 3. Grants are also available for programs to recruit and support staff to attain an infant/toddler Child Development Associate credential (CDA), as well as a supervising staff person with a bachelor’s degree, which sets a higher standard for care. Programs that meet the requirements outlined in the legislation are then eligible for a higher child care subsidy reimbursement rate of $22,000 per year to cover increased staffing and other costs. Expanding the availability and quality of child care for infants and toddlers does more than help families work. It provides an educational opportunity for our youngest children, supporting their healthy growth and development and preparing them for preschool and beyond.

For the foregoing reasons, LWVNJ respectfully urges you to pass A1469, A4176, A4177, A4178 and A4179. Thank you for your time and consideration.