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Testimony on Senate Bill 56

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of King Street Center. Before speaking to the bill, I'd like to first share with you who King Street is. It is our vision that every child and family thrives in an equitable community. Our mission is to empower youth to explore their talents and find their voice through learning, play, and opportunity. KSC serves youth and their families experiencing economic insecurity and systemic marginalization, with an emphasis on people from the global majority and immigrant or refugee communities in Burlington. Children who attend or are served by King Street begin as young as 18 months and go beyond 18 years. More than 80% of our families are people of the global majority, most of whom come from Vermont's immigrant and refugee communities. Many of our families have been with us for more than a decade, with their oldest starting as toddlers to their youngest in high school, making us a deeply trusted partner in their and their children's lives. We are a five-star therapeutic early childhood education program and we pride ourselves on providing high quality care to our community.

I am thrilled that the legislature is looking at ways to further invest in our youngest children. It is no secret that child care providers, including King Street, have struggled. Like others, KSC has had its fair share of staffing challenges. We too have to raise private dollars to support our early childhood program, which cannot be sustained at the current subsidy rate. Nearly all of the children who come to the center receive child care subsidy. And those who don't, are still very low-income but do not qualify for subsidy due to work requirements. I will come back to this

shortly. Also like other programs, we are seeing more and more families struggle as we head out of the worst of covid. Children need more supports, have more behavioral and mental health challenges, and more of them live in families that are increasingly struggling to meet basic needs. Over the last two years, we've increased our workforce's salary considerably just to ensure that we can retain our high quality staff. We've done this by raising private dollars and what keeps me up at night is how to ensure we can continue to sustain this new workforce reality we all live in.

S.56 aims to address a very important crisis that all communities are facing: child care is simply unaffordable for too many families and unsustainable for many providers. What we have now is not working and I think we can all agree something must change. There is a lot proposed in this bill that would help Vermonters.

First, I appreciate that the legislature is taking up the conversation around expanding universal pre-k. I think there is a lot of potential to further invest in our public education system and I think there is a lot to be discussed about what children need and what environment is best suited for them. It is rarely the case, especially with the population we serve, that a one size fits all approach is the answer. I think it is critical that a committee take the time to study and discuss how to educate all young children and support the establishment of a study committee.

Second, there is no question that expanding CCFAP, both in terms of no co-pay and eligibility for participation, is much needed for both families and providers across Vermont. For King Street, because we serve the lowest income families in our community, most of our families already qualify under the current income thresholds.

I deeply believe that anytime we consider expanding access for families under any program, we must also consider how to ensure that our most vulnerable children and families continue to also be supported and not left behind. In a moment where we are talking about completely overhauling our entire childcare system so that it better works for families and providers, to not remove work requirements for families to qualify for subsidy is a serious missed opportunity. Further, by maintaining work requirements we are unequivocally, disproportionately impacting low-income children and families of color. Many of our refugee families do not have two parent working households. There are many reasons for this, some of which can be cultural and some of which simply has to do with what systems of support were set up for them upon arrival in Vermont to be able to actually participate in the workforce. These children are no less deserving of quality early childhood education. I would urge the legislature to consider not leaving this community behind as we increase supports for Vermont families to have access to high quality affordable childcare.

I do appreciate the requirement in this bill for CCFAP applications to be in plain language and available in multiple formats. I'd ask that the committee also consider how to deepen the equity lens on this requirement. As a center that provides a lot of support to families to fill out the application, it would be incredibly supportive and respectful of families to have on hand the application in the top 5 or so languages spoken by Vermonters. Even if we or they filled out the application in English, giving the information in a way that allows parents to understand what they are filling out and feel part of the process, would be a step in the right direction to acknowledge and incorporate more communities into the way we do things.

I'm thrilled to see an increase in the CCFAP rate and the decoupling of that rate from the STARS system. This is critical and I cannot express enough how supportive this section is of our

field. Like I said, we are only able to sustain our program because we also raise private dollars and this would be a significant way to sustain our program in the future.

Also really significant for us and providers like us is the shift from attendance-based to enrollment-based payment of CCFAP. This is huge. Our costs do not change because a child is out for a day or a week. We still need to provide care, we still need the same number of teachers, we still need to be able to cover our costs. It's very stressful for providers to be forced to choose between healthy classrooms and income to support children and programs. This change allows all providers to stop having to make that choice and acknowledges that our work and support of children do not waver nor rest upon whether or not they miss a few days of care. Thank you.

It's also really important to acknowledge that children, regardless of their citizenship status, deserve access to high quality care, just as low-income children with a parent who stays at home do, and I am so glad to see this in the bill.

Finally, while I know that it may not be the jurisdiction of this committee to determine how all the components of this bill are funded, I would be remiss as a representative of the communities King Street serves, to not state my opposition to the repeal of the Child Tax Credit in order to redirect funds to early childhood education. There is a significant amount of evidence that shows that the absolute best way to help move children out of poverty and support the most vulnerable families is to directly give them cash payments. 34,000 low-income children are eligible to receive this credit this year. But more important than any research, I want you to know that this will impact every single one of our families. Every single one, most of whom are struggling to put food on the table, who work long hours in low paying jobs, who care deeply about being able to provide for their families, will hurt if this is the way our state decides to fund

this bill. Vermonters care deeply about one another, they care deeply about the population we serve. I know that as a state, we value and support one another - it's our trademark. I ask the legislature to please not ask families who can least afford it, to pay for this really exciting investment in our early childhood education system.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to this bill. I am so excited to see its progress and I believe in what it is trying to do. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.