

My name is Kay Curtis.

I am the owner director of a Licensed Early Education Program that I run in my home in Brattleboro, which I have been doing for 13 years. There are only about 20 licensed home programs in Vermont.

We have twelve spots in which we take care of the children of 17 families. My program is a 5 star program.

With the help of three employees, 38 people go to work or school because of the school I built.

Three quarters of the children in our program qualify for State Subsidy. We go the extra mile for these families. Often our parents need support in their ability to parent.

I was excited when I learned about the Early Educator's Union four years ago. We needed more support from the state. I had struggled for years trying to make my program earn enough money to pay my bills and keep a car running.

Coming together to build this would allow me to meet other providers. We are very isolated in our homes and we need a collective voice.

Home programs that serve thousands of Vermont's children do not have a real VOICE in decisions that are made around our profession.

Because of the nature of our work, 12 hours a day five days a week plus paperwork, we have had to trust others to make these decisions for us. We are tired of surviving the decisions that get made without our input.

So for the last four years we have organized for a real voice. We have made significant strides, but it is not enough. We have demanded to be in the room when some decisions are made, but we still do not have the power of being able to negotiate as equals—like nurses, teachers and firefighters.

We have spoken up to explain how the Federal food program and the state regulations and the STARS requirements work and sometimes don't work, well or efficiently together. We have also spoken about how adding a well-meaning new idea can undo the good intent of something else. Unless you spend endless hours working inside each of the various systems you will not get the whole picture. We have the needs of families, often at risk families, at the top of our priorities. To keep our programs alive and vital to serve these children we need a voice in the process.

As we have begun to organize, this has begun to happen, but without the right to organize and negotiate, we cannot have a meaningful and on-going structure.

What we have discovered is that we are the expert at what we do. Any provider who can manage 6 - 12 children in their home and keep all these varied systems in their thinking and do it year in and year out gets my recommendation for being pretty smart, determined, committed resourceful.

S.316 gives us the ability, if a majority of providers choose, to have a structure to gather ourselves and discuss what is working and not working...to give feedback on innovating even cost saving ways the systems might play together.

I will never forget the day Deputy Commissioner Reeva Murphy pulled me aside in one of these corridors a few years back and asked "What can we do to fix the STARS program? Why do providers not want to participate?" I reminded her that it was an incentive program but that they had pulled all the incentives out. No one spoke to us before this decision was made. This decision to end the STARS bonuses cost my small program \$7000 a year.

I found out in an e-mail after borrowing the money to build in an additional classroom for the children. It had never occurred to me that I needed to drive to Montpelier to protect the money I had been promised by the STARS upgrade I had earned.

Providers have been attending meeting around the state with the support of the AFT and we have begun to shape the legislative priorities. Providers have learned to articulate their priorities. I believe this makes us better teachers for our children and the parents of our children. We have found subs for our programs and gotten in our cars to be here over and over again for four years.

We have been doing the hard work to have a collective voice We deserve the right to decide whether to organize and form a union. We could choose to be proud of who we are and our daily contribution to Vermont's children. We could see our programs as something we can sustain and build into something great. We could find the voice to advocate for sensible decisions around our profession. Home-based early educators need the same right as other professionals to be able to choose to organize into a union to structure this advocacy, and S.316 would give us this right.

I hope you will support this bill and support us in our efforts to work collectively to advocate for ourselves, for the families we serve, and for the children we care for.