

Testimony to House Agriculture Committee

Early Childhood Legislative Day: March 12, 2014

I am Jenna Whitson, Child Nutrition Advocate for Hunger Free Vermont. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the importance of increasing access to quality childcare especially for low-income Vermont families. I have worked with Hunger Free Vermont for the past 1.5 years. I work closely with child care providers and child care advocates around the state to expand access to nutritious meals and snacks for young children.

Early childhood is a period of rapid brain and body development. During this time, it is crucial that young children regularly receive good nutrition for their immediate and long-term health and development. However, In Vermont, 23% of children under the age of 6 - almost 1 in 4 - are living in homes without consistent access to adequate food. These children are living on the cheapest, poorest quality food, and occasionally going without. These are the children who are at great risk for significant mental health and behavioral problems, development delays, and poor health. They are not ready for school and do poorly once there.

Not only is Vermont suffering high rates of hunger – the cost to Vermont of child hood hunger has been estimated at more \$300 million a year – but we also have high rates of obesity and chronic disease related to poor nutrition. We can improve both these trends by providing our children with high quality childcare with meals. When we serve meals in child care, we have an opportunity to expose children to a variety of foods and teach them good eating habits that will

serve them for a life time. Children who are fed in child care have better health, better behavior and stronger development. Unfortunately, less than half of VT childcare programs provide meals even though there is a federal program that reimburses for meals. If you go into a childcare program that does not serve meals, this is the picture: one child with only a bag of cheerios and a fruit roll-up will be seated next to a child with a beautiful lunch of a sandwich with fresh fruits and vegetables seated next to a child with a Lunchable.

Whereas when children are fed meals together in child care the children and staff sit together to share a meal. They talk about the food and the children learn through experiencing and watching others eat. I am always impressed by the variety of foods that young children are tasting and sharing including local kale chips and baked parsnip “fries.” Child care providers will tell you how many parents say “since eating at child care, my child wants me to make salads and vegetables – things they never ate before.”

Additionally, meals in childcare offer an opportunity to build upon the success we have seen with Farm to School Programs in Vermont. As I’m sure you’re aware, Vermont has one of the strongest Farm to School programs in the country with over 60% of schools participating. Last year, reimbursement for child care meals brought about \$4.8 million into Vermont – despite so few programs offering meals. These funds can be used to support Farm to Preschool programs to connect our youngest children with Vermont farmers and producers. We are already seeing the beginning of this work in Vermont but there are ample opportunities to expand. For example, last year, I attended a meeting of an informal group of parents, providers, and producers in Addison County that hope to develop programs to connect young children with local farmers.

Quality early learning programs are essential for a child's success, and they offer many opportunities for learning, health, and development. Children need both access to quality learning and adequate nutrition to reach their full potential. Investing now in Child Care Financial Assistance will ensure that more low-income families can access quality early learning programs. If childcare meals are considered an integral part of quality early learning, we can ensure that children in these families have access to the nutrition they need to learn, grow, and prepare for school. Adequately funding the child care financial assistance program ensures that all Vermont children and families have all the support and resources they need to succeed.

Thank you so much for your time and attention.

Jenna Whitson, Child Nutrition Advocate for Hunger Free Vermont