

Parent Child Center Network - Claire Kendall testimony – Feb 18, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Claire Kendall and I am Co Executive Director at the Family Center of Washington County. I am here on behalf of the Parent Child Center Network. Parent Child Centers are a network of 15 community-based non-profit organizations, serving all of Vermont. The focus of each PCC is to provide support and education to families with young children. The goal is to help all Vermont families get off to a healthy start, promote well-being, and build on family strengths.

We use the strengthening families framework to wrap support around families so they can provide the best environment possible for their children and for each other. Five protective factors are the focus of this framework:

1. Social Connections
2. Social and emotional competence of children
3. Knowledge of parenting and child development
4. Concrete Supports in times of need
5. Parental Resilience

This approach allows us to help families get stronger, despite whatever challenges they bring with them when they come to us. I mention this because it is fundamentally different from and an important compliment to the approach of DCF. DCF is appropriately focused completely on risk assessment and child safety. We are focused on building family strength, long term stability for the child and whenever possible, intact families. We do the “upstream” work that helps to prevent further crisis, instability and danger for the children.

Along with my testimony, I am submitting a compilation of some of the results the PCCs have seen while working with families in our various programs. Here, I would like to highlight the results from three PCCs:

- 98% of children in our Intensive Family Based Services program were successfully prevented from entering custody. (Sunrise Family Resource Center, Bennington)
- 84% of families as “open cases” in our Strengthening Families program were successful at retaining custody of their children. (Family Center of Northwestern VT, St. Albans)
- 92% of families receiving supervised visitation services were able to retain custody of their children. (Orange County PCC, Tunbridge)

These kind of results can help to “turn the curve” on the escalating number of cases that DCF is dealing with. I am here to encourage you to invest in the Parent Child Centers across the state so that we can serve more families and help parents to be successful in creating nurturing environments for children. This work will make our whole state stronger. We have specific requests – our platform is also included with my testimony. Our base funding has not been increased in 20 years, despite increased need and a rise in expenses. The Strengthening Families Pilot Demonstration Projects have had to reduce staff, despite increased need all across the state.

The PCCs have a strengths-based, values system approach, so we begin by looking at a family’s strengths. EVERY family has strengths. Your strengths as a committee, for instance, include a strong desire to help Vermonters, a commitment to being well-informed, and a well-defined process for doing your work.

Identifying and working to strengthen social connections for families helps to build healthy, positive and trusting relationships that provide supports and opportunities solve problems, reduce isolation and help act as a buffer from life's stress.

Having knowledge of parenting and child development helps parents to make smart choices when interacting with and caring for their children. Parents must have developmentally appropriate expectations in order for the children to get the support they need and for the parents to feel successful. Children under 3 years old are especially vulnerable to inappropriate or negative responses from parents – these interactions can be traumatic. PCCs offer wrap-around support to work with the whole family to break cycles of negative parenting and build an understanding of child development that inform parenting strategies that support healthy physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth in children.

- 100% of families enrolled in parent education and support groups demonstrated increase knowledge of child development and efficacy in parenting skills (VNA, Burlington)
- 85% of parents participating in parent education, "feel more capable of handling their child's behavior and are less stressed" (Springfield Parent Child Center)

The opiate crisis presents the state with a particularly challenging moment in our state's development. Vermont is currently responding after the fact – trying to get people into treatment and trying to keep children safe even as their parents are struggling. We need to and can get in front of the epidemic by focusing our efforts at the family level and helping all families to build their protective factors. PCCs have done this for decades and could do more if we had adequate funding to serve more families.

- 81% of the women showed decreased frequency of use of substances (Lund, Burlington)
- 100% of the babies born were born free of illicit substances (Lund, Burlington)

Another protective factor is the social and emotional competence of children – including confidence or self-esteem, connectedness, and a sense of a belonging. Children build this competence when their parents interact with them in appropriate ways. Family interactions that foster positive communication, recognize and manage emotions and build relationships, lead to autonomy and success later in life as adults.

- 39 youth graduated from high school and 9 of those youth are enrolled in and attending college (NEKCA/Parent Child Center North, Newport)
- 67% of children in child care are meeting Teaching Strategies Gold in all five domains and 33% are exceeding criteria (Rutland PCC)

Concrete supports in times of need help to create a pathway to independence for families. Many of the families we serve are operating in an environment where there are never enough resources to meet their needs – an impossible situation that I think you know well because of the work you do every day. Providing concrete supports to give a small cushion allows the family to get ahead, make a financial plan and have a long-term outlook. This ability to look ahead helps children because their parents can look forward and make the best choices each day for their family's future.

- 88% of parents attending playgroups reported being provided with information about resources available in their community (Family Center of Washington County)
- 141 families, reaching 502 children and adults were provided emergency assistance with rent, fuel, utilities, food, gas, diapers, and clothing. (Lamoille Family Center, Morrisville)

Parental resilience means that parents can solve problems when they happen by making good choices, rather than reacting with fear and despondency. PCCs work with families to build problem solving skills –

teaching families to map out their situation, put it into perspective, prioritize issues, identify resources, and make a plan for achieving success. These families are not dealing with easy stuff – if it were easy, we would not be working with them. You know this story well – if the budget process were easy, we wouldn't be having this conversation. It is the difficult issues that families are dealing with that are causing our state's current crisis – substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty. These families need to learn ways to build resilience so that these problems are not continued by their children in their own families. That is how we will turn the curve.

- 75% of Reach Up participants have shown improvement over time as evidenced by an increase in score on the Self Sufficiency Outcome Matrix (The Family Place, Norwich)
- 75% of participants in the LINK and Families Learning Together programs report they “have a plan for the future” (Lamoille Family Center, Morrisville)

Thank you for listening to me. I hope you will consider investing “upstream” in the work that the Parent Child Centers are doing. The Parent Child Centers are the answer to strengthen our families and our state.