

Testimony for February 15, 2016 Budget Hearing

My name is Ann Dillenbeck, and I am a resident of Charlotte. Thank you for the chance to testify today.

There is wide agreement in the legislature that our children are our future – our future decision makers, business owners, parents and community leaders. We know we share responsibility to ensure equal opportunity for all Vermont’s children and their families. The difficult conversations are about how best to advance that goal during another tough budget year. Thank you for your work on this.

I hope the legislature will change the financial situation by seeking additional revenue (and I say that as a parent with two children in college) and look to legal requirements and current research to inform its decisions about investments.

1. Part C funding – We must increase state funding for federally mandated Early Intervention services for children ages birth to three with developmental delays or medical conditions that put them at risk of delay, known as Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The funding for this program needs to reflect host agencies’ new responsibility for initial assessments to determine eligibility and assessments 6 months before a child’s third birthday to determine potential eligibility for Part B or EEE services. I applaud the Governor for including funding for this new responsibility in his proposed budget, and ask the Appropriations Committees to investigate the true impact on host agencies of those new requirements to see if more funding is required.
2. The investment with the most significant direct impact, compounded by a secondary boost to other health, education, and human service investments: To maximize our ongoing investments in early childhood services, we must help families meet their basic needs. The services our Parent Child Centers, Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Home Health Agencies, Community Mental Health Agencies, school districts and supervisory unions, and early care and education programs provide are critical and contribute to significant positive change. They are undermined, though, by the powerful effects of poverty. Dr. Kimberly Noble of Columbia University’s Teacher’s College has investigated carefully the link between Socioeconomic Status (SES) and children’s cognitive skills (February 2, 2016 Lecture with Kimberly Noble). She concludes that, at the population level, differences in SES account for the greatest disparity from kindergarten to adolescence in children’s language, memory, and certain forms of executive function. Furthermore, this disparity is reflected in actual brain structure and is clinically and statistically significant by 15 to 21 months – before children turns 2. Even small poverty reductions between children’s prenatal year and age 2 have positive results on families’ and children’s well-being. Noble describes the mechanisms for this effect and speaks to the clear policy implications of her research.

3. Funding for CCFAP and VHCB: Two targeted and proven Vermont vehicles for reducing poverty are incremental investment to increase the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) and full funding for the VT Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). Without an increase in funding for CCFAP for FY17, the Child Development Division will need to, for the first time in Vermont history, establish waiting lists for this essential program. With additional, incremental increases, the program can start the long process of catching up with current market rates and move closer to compliance with federal guidelines. VHCB also needs your support. For children, leading pediatrician Dr. Megan Sandel calls housing a “health care vaccine.” The importance of housing starts even before birth: women who are homeless while pregnant are 50 percent more likely to have a low-birth weight baby and more than 30 percent more likely to have a pre-term delivery than women who were not homeless while pregnant. When families can meet their basic needs, when they have housing, and can secure the child care they need to join or remain in the workforce, their young children are protected from the worst achievement gaps and health concerns threatened by low SES.

As the Chittenden County Coordinator for Children’s Integrated Services, I care deeply about child development and family support services, but I care most about positive outcomes for children and their families. Addressing poverty, particularly among families with young children, is the best investment this state can make. It makes Vermont a great place to raise a child, attracts employees with children, and creates cost efficiencies in our education system, our corrections system, and the economy down the road.