

Act 43 Testimony - Amy Johnson (PCCN)  
Advisory Council on Child Poverty and Strengthening Families

Good morning council members. Thank you for having me - it is truly an honor to speak with you and represent the great work of the Parent Child Center Network.

As the Agency of Human Services is tasked with creating a sustainable plan to become a trauma informed agency and create a system that is able to deliver services to children and families that mitigate the risks and effects of trauma and builds resiliency in homes and communities, the Parent Child Center Network rises to the top as one of many great partners that is a natural fit in moving this charge forward.

The Parent Child Center Network, a network of 15 family resource centers across the state of Vermont, was built into designation to provide upstream prevention and early intervention services to all children and families and especially to those at risk. Parent Child Centers, deeply rooted in the Strengthening Families Framework, provide services that are family driven, strength based, and multigenerational all while building protective factors in children and families. With the help of esteemed community partners, PCCs work builds communities where children and families thrive; communities that support children in having a healthy childhood.

The PCC network is linked together by their 8 core services; services that families identify as needing to be supported comprehensively and holistically. These services include: home visits, early childhood services, parent education, parent support groups, concrete supports, playgroup, information and referral, and community development. These services, not coincidentally, are nearly identically in line with the Center for Disease Controls program area recommendations that communities should invest in to mitigate the risk and effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). PCCs are dually focused on ACEs and toxic stress mitigation as well as social determinants of health and meeting the basic and complex needs of families and do this work through the 8 core services.

Many entities, including the Department of Children and Families, as well as other strong community partners provide services and supports to children and families in partnership with one another. This collaborative and often collective model allows us, as a system, to meet the needs of families experiencing complex trauma and those at risk of adversity. The system exists to support families, and it is a robust one. The Parent Child Centers, specifically, have been supporting this work since 1988. We hope there is an understanding that we do this work and we do it well. There is no need for a parallel system to be created. We need to invest in the current system we have. Buy it, don't build it.

The landscape is continuously changing, and though we are decades old we are designed to be innovative and responsive to community needs. Among many other initiatives we are particularly proud of the work that we have done to support the increasing needs of families. Many of our on-site childcare centers are therapeutic childcare programs. These programs provide quality early care and education programs that have trauma informed and trained staff, lower child to staff ratios, wrap around supports for families, on site play therapy and other specialist supports embedded in the program. Furthermore, we are keenly aware of the connection between physical and mental health and fully support and are engaged in many pediatric partnerships. These partnerships allow for trained family support specialists embedded in regional pediatric practices providing screenings, resources, referrals, and short term care coordination for families with children birth to six months. As the opioid epidemic

continues to plague the state we have responded by embedding substance clinicians into pediatric practices and schools. And we have unique partnerships with our Federally Qualified Health Centers to promote wellness and holistic health. We are strong advocates for the PCC's continuing to provide support to families in partnership with pediatric and other healthcare practices as we are well aware that 96% of young children access pediatric care.

All of these great upstream services highlight the critical importance of investing in front end work. Prevention is crucial in turning the curve for our families - the service delivery system already exists for providing preventative services to families that help to build resiliency and other protective factors and reduce risk.

The impact isn't always immediate but what is gained, in the long run, by providing upstream services is cost effective and only makes our state stronger and healthier. Prevention has a long term ripple effect on the life of a child and their family that is profound. We can see examples of this in the Parent Child Center case studies. Not only are we able to understand the scope of services that are being provided and the impact they have on families but also see the long term savings of moving funding from the back end to the front. Our system is powerful and we are making a difference - I'm often reminded of this when I reflect on the words of our families:

"Without the Parent Child Center at Lund, I would not be where I am today. I would not be sober. I would not have my child. I would not know how to be a parent. I would not have a safe place to live. I wouldn't have anything. I chose Lund because I knew it had the ability to help me change my life. And it did."

Despite chronic underfunding, we move forward in our pursuits to support children and families, build protective factors, and instill hope. If we want families to get the services they need then we need to invest in services and organizations that provide these to families; specifically programs we know and trust to provide services that work for families. Parent Child Centers, and our community partners, are the answer.

Thank you.