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To: Advisory Council on Child Poverty and Strengthening Families

From: Sharron Harrington, Strategic Initiatives Manager, Vermont Birth to Five

## **Testimony on the Strengthening Families Framework and its Application in Early Care and Learning Settings**

Thank you for your invitation to speak with you today about Vermont's Strengthening Families work. My name is Sharron Harrington, and I am the Strategic Initiatives Manager for Vermont Birth to Five. Vermont Birth to Five (VB5), along with our sister organization Let's Grow Kids, is an initiative of the Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children. As part of my work with Vermont Birth to Five, I am a certified Strengthening Families Trainer, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about the implementation of the Strengthening Families Framework in Vermont, and the accomplishments that have resulted from its implementation in Vermont's early care and learning system.

Through close collaboration with state agencies and community organizations, Vermont Birth to Five directly engages child care and early learning providers and communities to improve program quality, capacity, and operations. We see Strengthening Families as a critical component of that work, as early care and learning programs who have implemented the Framework have seen marked improvement in their quality and ability to support and serve young children and their families.

### **The Strengthening Families Framework and the Five Protective Factors**

The Strengthening Families Framework (SFF) includes five critical "Protective Factors," conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or societies that help to mitigate or eliminate risk factors for adverse child or family experiences.<sup>i</sup> These five Protective Factors include:

- parental resilience
- social connections
- knowledge of parenting and child development
- concrete support in times of need, and
- social competence of children.

Implementation of the Strengthening Families Framework occurs at both the systems level as well as at the practice level. The Framework relies on programs, initiatives and agencies to shift their organizational culture and day-to-day practices to better build upon families' strengths and help cultivate the five protective factors. The protective factors as practiced and acquired by families go on to be the most powerful tools in improving child development, building stronger families, and preventing child abuse or neglect.

My work as a certified Strengthening Families Trainer has focused on implementing the Framework within Vermont's early care and learning system. Child care and early learning

programs that adopt the framework utilize these evidence-based protective factors to inform their work to build upon the strengths of families and improve child development through this two-generation approach. What I have witnessed in my work with VB5 while expanding the Strengthening Families approach to over 50 family child care programs in the state, is that the framework has significantly leveraged and improved upon the valuable work that child care providers in Vermont are doing to support the children and families that they serve in developing protective factors and building upon their strengths and resiliency.

### **How SFF Works on the Ground in Early Care and Learning Settings**

Child care and early learning programs, and the early educators who lead them, are often some of the most consistent and important components of children's and families' day-to-day lives. For this reason, child care and early learning programs are ideal settings to implement the Framework's two-generation approach in order to help children and families who are in need of additional support. Vermont Birth to Five, in collaboration with a number of other partners, has found the Strengthening Families Framework to be particularly successful in providing support to early educators as they work to build resiliency in families and improve child development outcomes within their programs.

Over a three-year period from 2014-2017 Vermont Birth to Five and Vermont's Child Development Division, along with evaluation support from the Education Development Center, were actively engaged in implementing six community pilot projects that trained child care providers who operate home-based early care and learning programs in the Strengthening Families Framework. As of December of 2017, thanks to funding through the Strengthening Families Child Care Grant from the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, Vermont Birth to Five, along with its partners, has trained 51 family child care providers throughout the state in to implement the SF Framework in their programs.

These pilots have overall been a significant success story for the Framework's ability to support both the providers who adopt it, as well as the families and young children whose attend the programs. Data from the pilots illustrates that the Framework works hand-in-hand with early care and learning programs seeking to increase their quality, enabling early educators with strategies and coaching resources, rather than adding to their workload. At the beginning of the pilot, 29% of the participating programs were at 4 or 5 STARS, and by the end of the pilot, 67% had reached this level of quality.

I would like to share with you a number of examples from these projects to demonstrate the Framework's immediate impact after implementation in a number of Vermont Family Child Care Programs, as well as the potential for a wider implementation of this evidence-based approach.

One of the six Strengthening Families pilots was based at Northwestern Counseling and Support Services in St. Albans, who served as the area's host agency. The St. Albans cohort's success displays the Framework's power in improving the well-being and cultivating the resiliency of children and families accessing early care and learning programs. The St. Albans pilot included nine Family Child Care providers who collectively serve 56 families, including 44 children eligible for 100% assistance through the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP). Their experiences with implementing the Framework are compelling ones, as they expressed both significant challenges paired with major accomplishments after their 17-hour SFF training, supportive family coaching and thorough implementation planning.

One child care provider in the St. Albans story illustrates the power of implementing the Strengthening Families approach in a child care setting: “I had a single mom with 3 kids with an eviction notice. The Strengthening Families Family Resource Coach worked with her and the lawyer for the rental and the eviction was stopped and back rent paid. She is back on track.” Their testimony speaks to the St. Albans area’s notable success with the Framework’s inclusion of “Flex Funds” and a Strengthening Families Family Resource Coach, both of which are components that enable child care providers to leverage their trusted relationships with families and children to better support them in accessing a variety of services. In St. Albans, child care providers were able to connect families with Flex Funds to support unexpected or uncovered emergency expenses such as rent, car repairs, winter coats and more.

In addition to providing supplementary coaching and financial support to families, the pilots have been successful in empowering families with various educational resources to further develop their understanding of child development and social-emotional competence. A cohort in Springfield displays the pilots’ success with developing meaningful and engaging opportunities for families that otherwise would likely not be provided at a venue as accessible as their child care provider. During the fourth quarter of 2017, the program’s participants successfully organized and implemented two major events that engaged a large number of their families and provided impactful workshops, conversations and programming on social-emotional development, parent resiliency and accessing support services. These events always include high-quality child care on-site, enabling as many families as possible to attend and engage meaningfully in the content.

### **How SF Works to Further Cross-Sector Support of Families and Children**

The Strengthening Families Framework is also well-suited to support cross-sector collaboration among organizations, programs and services that touch the lives of families and children. The Framework is not intended to be implemented in a single program, but rather best supports families and their children when applied holistically across-sectors and throughout various programs, services and supports that they are touched by. In Rutland, the Promise Communities program offered a “Train the Trainer” workshop on Strengthening Families for participants across sectors, in an effort to introduce a much broader community to the Framework. The training included participation from the Vermont Department of Health, the hospital, a Starting Points Network leader, Vermont Achievement Center, a Head Start program, a for-profit child care director, along with others. The Rutland County Head Start Assistant Director is now coordinating a city-wide monthly community of practice call with the national trainers to maintain the region’s commitment to working collaboratively on implementing the Framework.

A further sign of productive cross-sector collaboration on implementing the Strengthening Families Framework can be seen in many regional councils of Building Bright Futures, the state’s public-private early childhood partnership and legislative early childhood advisor to the administration and legislature. Regional Councils help to implement Vermont’s Early Childhood Action Plan at the community level, and regional councils who have adopted the Framework, have incorporated it in their regional early childhood action plans, as they see it as a promising evidence-based strategy for mitigating adverse childhood experiences and supporting the resiliency of families in their communities.

## **Summary**

In closing, Vermont Birth to Five greatly values the Strengthening Families Framework for the tools that it offers and can continue to provide to early educators seeking to implement a two-generation approach and to the broader social sector of our state. After even just a few years, it has proven to be incredibly valuable in the child care and early learning programs that have implemented it. After comprehensive training, coaching and guidance with implementation, family child care providers have been better equipped to support the children they serve and their families with building resilience through protective factors based on evidence-based approaches. We greatly appreciate the Advisory Council on Child Poverty and Strengthening Families' interest in learning more about the Framework, what it has done, and what we, as a state, can do to better support Vermont families and children through the programs and services they are already accessing.

I would be happy to share further insight we have gleaned from the data Vermont Birth to Five has collected on the six Strengthening Families Child Care Pilots we support in Vermont, or any additional information that would be useful to the work of this group.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

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<sup>i</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2018). *Introduction to Strengthening Families: A Protective Factors Framework*. Retrieved from <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/StrengtheningFamilies101.pdf>.