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In December 2000 I was in the process of purchasing a local business and became aware that my 2 ½ year old daughter was receiving substandard care in a Registered Child Care. After immediately removing her I realized I had a decision to make – either continue on the path I had established or turn my life upside down and create an entirely new plan including job, home and additional education. In February 2001 I opened a Vermont Registered Family Childcare Home and have never regretted my decision.

My background includes:

- Bachelor of Arts - Liberal Studies with a concentration in Early Childhood Education
- Licensed VT Teacher – Early Education Endorsement
- Associates of Science – Marketing and Small Business Management
- 5 STARS Program
- Prequalified Act 166 Partner

My program is in Springfield. I serve 11 children, ages 2 to 9, who come from 8 families, in both part-time and full-time care. Operating a Family Child Care Home is not a 40 hour per week job. The time that goes into this work is almost immeasurable when taking into account planning, prep time, cleaning, education, parent engagement, office administration, professional meetings and this doesn't include the time spent with the children. A family child care provider offers consistency and security to a family. We build relationships with the family and a trusting bond focused on best possible outcomes for the child.

As a small business owner, I need to charge rates that provide an income for my family and are also competitive with other providers in my area. And yet I watch the families I serve struggle to pay for the care I provide, even the middle-class families. My program also serves families qualifying for CCFAP. Unfortunately, many struggling families do not qualify and those that do often have a co-pay that prohibits enrollment or forces providers themselves to subsidize the system. Regularly I take calls from families seeking child care – they have no options for either enrollment or affordability. They are left to make only a difficult decision where there is no choice. They enroll in low quality programs or programs that are not regulated. The children are at risk as there is no oversight yet the families need income for housing, health, food and safety. They are forced to gamble with their child's safety in order to provide for their family. Unfortunately, in our area we have seen a number of child care programs "close," but I know that some of them are still operating illegally.

Childcare requires oversight to ensure safety and high quality, and regulations are an important part of that. I have seen the new regulations have a significant impact on programs, especially family child care homes. Due to the lack of resources available, some programs have incurred significant financial strain to ensure compliance as well as struggled with the late arrival of documents and guidance materials. Programs already feel a strain both trying to meet family/child needs as well as financial hardships, unfortunately the updated regulations have in some areas exacerbated an already strained system.

In spite of the pressures on the system, there are many wonderful early educators providing high-quality care throughout the state. In my work as a mentor with Vermont Birth to Five over the past several years, I have watched home providers dramatically increase their STARS ratings and the level of quality of their programs. We've made great strides in increasing quality, now we need to turn our attention to increasing capacity, since we know that the shortage of care is at a crisis level. Vermont Birth to Five is shifting our focus and our resources to working to increase the number of child care spots available around the state. We've set the ambitious goal of working with communities to create 500 new child care spots statewide this year and in coming years. We recently announced a new grant program, Make Way for Kids, that is available to communities to assess the needs and resources for child care capacity and create expanded availability. It's exciting work, but the state won't see the expansion that's needed without additional funds.

When we talk about high-quality care, not everyone knows what that looks like. The children in my care enjoy various learning experiences each day through a play based approach. My Act 166 partnership provides me with enriching knowledge about the needs of students entering kindergarten and what skills will most help them be successful. Act 166 has helped to boost the level of quality care and education that children are getting. But I also face challenges as an Act 166 partner. There are administrative challenges – numerous reporting forms unique to each district, varying payment schedules and approaches to information sharing. It can become cumbersome and takes time away from the focus on children. I routinely see programs struggle trying to find and retain a licensed teacher. Qualified teachers are limited as salary and benefits in the early childhood field pale in comparison to other fields. Anything that the legislature can do to improve resources for professional development for child care providers – like the TEACH program - will help to increase the number of qualified professionals to staff programs.

I'm happy to answer any questions about my experience as an early educator, a mentor to other providers, and a pre-K partner.