



ACES Testimony- Senate Health and Welfare Committee

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Kathleen Holsopple, Executive Director of the Vermont Federation of Families

Good Morning.

I am Kathleen Holsopple, the Executive Director of the Vermont Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health for the past 13 years. I am a mother of 3, and my youngest, Josh, is a young man with developmental and mental health challenges. I am also a person with an aces score of 5. That score reaches the higher numbers due to the questions that ask about neglect, which from my perspective is all about growing up in situational poverty. My very hard working, loving parents did not neglect me. They did the best they could under the circumstances life threw them.

I am speaking today for Vermont Federation of Families, for the Vermont Family Network and the families that we serve as family support organizations.

In the Aces discussions, I see two needs:

- Strengthen and build resiliency in families
- Professional development, support and supervision for direct line workers – non-profit as well as state and local.

Both need to happen, and both groups need resiliency.

I am concerned about “what” is in the plan, but will be speaking today about “how” we do the work. We need to be aware and prepared for “how” we do this work, so we do not re-traumatize people.

This is not, and should not, be an “us versus them” approach, as we have all experienced trauma in some way. This is about WE, Vermonters helping Vermonters.

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This process needs to be strength-based and not deficit-based. I appreciate the other speakers who also stressed a strength-based approach. My son is testimony to the value of strength-based approach. He would not be doing as well as he is today if we had focused on his needs only. Recognizing and building upon his strengths has built resiliency within him. We need to reduce the stigma of an ACES score by building resilience with a strength based philosophy and approach.

We must be careful not to be giving aces "tests" to youth, as it could easily become a self- fulfilling prophesy- "A prediction that directly or indirectly causes itself to become true."

We need to assess what our system has already that is working to build resiliency, and strengthen those programs and practices. Let's not jump to new programs until we know what we have and make those areas stronger.

We also need to look to the established non- profits to do what we each does best in this shared work of supporting and strengthening families,

Peers- people with lived experience- bring hope to those who have experienced difficult things in life, and must be part of the approach and the solution. For many, the trauma we have experienced has propelled us to help others. I am one of those, and peers in general are those people. We have a growing peer support movement in Vermont. Peers bring hope as no one else can. A peer is someone like me- a reliable ally- whose life experience is similar, yet is in a better place or in recovery from past experiences.

We know that:

ACE's scores don't tally the positive experiences in early life that help build resilience

There are many people with high ACE's scores that do remarkably well

How do we help our fellow Vermonters to bounce back?

- Talk about the strengths not the score
- It is about "us" not "them" Use the information to view behavioral issues through a new and less blaming lens

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