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Testimony to the Senate Education Committee on Early Care & Learning

Submitted by Tanya LaChapelle, Executive Director, Robin's Nest Children's Center

Thank you very much for inviting us to speak with you today about our experiences as a part of Vermont's early care and learning system. My name is Tanya LaChapelle, and I am the Executive Director of Robin's Nest Children's Center. Robin's Nest is a high quality, non-profit licensed early care and education program in the Old North End of Burlington. We provide a play-based environment for 4 infants, 17 toddlers and 21 preschoolers, nurturing minds, friendships and families. We are also a prequalified pre-K provider under Act 166 and a Head Start Partner Program. The Robin's Nest respects and values each individual family and their involvement is essential to the care and education that we provide.

Robin's Nest Children's Center opened on September 11, 1985. The center was the result of the efforts of a group of parents who wished to ensure that their children, as well as other children in the community, would have access to quality early care and education. Our purpose is to provide quality care and education in multi-age groups with a low child to adult ratios. This provides an opportunity for children to travel through developmental stages at their own rate and to learn from one another. Our multi-age model groups infants and toddlers from 6 weeks to 3 years old and 3-5 year olds in the preschool group. Multi-age grouping enables placements based on developmental and time of day needs offering fewer transitions and stronger child to child and child to staff relationships. As children of different age groups interact they learn acceptance of varying styles and abilities within the benefit of a consistent team of caregivers. We believe that each child should be offered a stimulating, safe environment where they can learn through play, and our curriculum is based on the children, their families, life cycles in nature and seasons, age appropriate skill development and developing creativity.

The Robin's Nest respects and values each individual family and is committed to celebrating diversity and supporting young children to learn to experience the world with open minds. The Robin's Nest community is broadly diverse. Our children, families and staff come from a range of cultures, traditions, socio-economic statuses and family structures. Our multi-age, family style program fosters the appreciation of all people and abilities and our human responsibility to care for and support one another.

The Robin's Nest mission ensures that all children, regardless of their socio-economic status have access to high quality early care and education. Robin's Nest reserves 25% of our total enrollment for under-served populations including those with low income and

minority backgrounds. These families access tuition funding through Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program. However, such funds only cover a portion of our overall tuition rate. Despite this gap, as a non-profit, community-driven center our commitment is a program free of barriers and full of support. We do not therefore charge a co-pay to make up the difference for families receiving tuition assistance from the state and instead look elsewhere to provide funding so that financial burdens do not restrict a family from joining Robin's Nest. We have found that successful families access consistent programs and support. Whether that be the refugee family, who finds a caring environment for their children to prosper in while navigating a new land with a new language, or a family facing extreme challenges. We currently have a family cared for by a single mother that has faced illness, housing changes, transportation challenges and homelessness. Last year, she made the decision to have her two older children move out of state temporarily to stay with extended family while she pieced things together for her family here. Upon her children's return, we were one of the first agencies she contacted. She expressed trust and gratitude for the care and consistency we had previously provided her and her son and wanted to continue that for her daughter who was now preschool age. Amongst severe family stress, we have been a caring consistent. For families receiving Child Care Financial Assistance, we offer no charge early care and education services, food, Head Start social services and warmth in an uncertain world.

To provide this type of holistic support to our families, our business has been developed strategically over time within a framework of quality services, quality employment standards, sound business practices, community connections and strong leadership. The internal program standards are high and are adhered to through regular evaluation of all facets of the program including regulatory compliance, STARS participation and regular staff and parent evaluations.

Center staffing is built on two levels of staff members with different standards and requirements. This includes leadership staff – directors and teachers and the support staff – caregivers and assistants. This creates built-in mentoring and team development while balancing staff costs. All program staff, including directors, spend time in the classrooms. This meets staffing needs while providing daily mentoring, supervision and staff guidance. Strong leadership is funded with professional salaries and benefits for leadership staff. Pay differentials are based on credentials, classroom responsibilities, administrative responsibilities and longevity. Livable wages are provided to permanent assistants and reasonable hourly fees are paid to caregivers who provide regular program support and substitute coverage. Robin's Nest offers benefits including health and dental insurance, paid vacation, personal and birthday days, professional development support, bonuses for professional development over the contractual minimum and access to a TIAA retirement account with contribution from our program. A substantial portion of the budget, 80%, is directed towards salaries. We believe that quality staffing is one of the greatest indicators of program quality. Our commitment to offering competitive wages and benefits and a supportive work atmosphere are reflected in a low turnover rate as well as abounding positive parent feedback in the yearly program evaluation submitted by parents. However, it is a challenge to find qualified staff within the confines of salaries that are high only compared to VT early childhood employment standards, but

not as compared to VT public schools or other professions, especially as we work to increase the credentialing standards of our staff in line with the updated center-based child care and preschool program regulations. I have worked at the program for 17 years. As a Robin's Nest staff member, I have always appreciated the professional support embedded in my job. I was hired with a degree and license in Elementary Education, then given support to achieve my early educator endorsement. This support came by way of funds, time, guidance and encouragement. When I accepted the director position, I was mentored by an exceptional leader and had full community support. I see myself as an early childhood success story. As director, I hear firsthand the challenges of working in this field. I have many staff members who struggle to afford housing and expenses. Staff who have come to me asking for raises to manage their expenses that I cannot give. For early childhood teachers to reach their full potential they need supportive programs with effective leadership.

The Robin's Nest business structure relies on strong policies, strong leadership and nimble fiscal management. The Board of Directors is made up of parents who work with leadership staff (Executive Director and Assistant Director) to develop policy and implement programming. The board president and director have a strong partnership. They follow a structured framework of accountability and oversight. An unforeseen benefit of parent board members is that some who participate on the RNCC board as a first experience of this type, then go on to school boards, the VT state legislature, and other community volunteer positions. Parent participation and volunteering is fostered in the program to encourage investment and connection to the program. We believe it has been an essential facet to sustaining quality practices while supporting families.

Balancing a lean non-profit budget requires consistent monitoring and oversight. Program fees are set at the top of the going rate in the Chittenden County region and raised every year. The fees are set based on budgeted needs and the budget is based on accurate estimate of fees (including anticipated funding from CCFAP, Parent Paid Tuition and Community Partnerships). Fundraising is used to support special projects, not regular business operations. Tuition revenue collected from tuition paying families is balanced with families whose tuition is paid through CCFAP with a ratio of 75%-25%. Overhead expenses are kept at bare minimums as the majority of the budget is directed to salaries and benefits. The increasing costs of supplies, rent, maintenance and security needs are growing challenges. This combines with ever increasing administrative requirements and staffing qualifications that jeopardize our staffing model and ability to provide professional wages.

We believe our philosophy and practices must extend outward to our community and state. Program leadership participates in local groups like the Building Bright Futures Regional Council and the Early Learning Partnership group as well as attending advocacy events, conferences and participating in initiatives that impact the well-being of children and families in Vermont. We believe in the value of community partnerships in terms of strengthening program quality and impacting the early care and education system. Partnerships are chosen carefully to ensure that they are sustainable. We have had success in long-term partnerships with Head Start and the Early Learning Partnership,

which began with Act 62 and grew with legislation to Act 166. Strong community partnerships like these improve both program quality and revenue.

For over thirty years Robin's Nest has grown as a leader in the field by delivering quality services, supporting an educated and compensated workforce and maintaining sound business practices. We have done this while developing parent and community relationships that support families while driving the field forward. I believe this is true of many programs throughout the state. Each program has variations and unique qualities, but, in my experience I have encountered a workforce committed to the children and families they serve. A workforce of early childhood professionals dedicated to finding the balance between business, oversight, accountability, an evolving system while caring for the children and families of our state.