



Testimony to Senate Committee on Health & Welfare

Date: Wednesday, March 29, 2017
From: Robyn Freedner-Maguire, Campaign Director, Let's Grow Kids
Re: S. 90, an act relating to coordinating Vermont's response to adverse childhood and family experiences

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak with you today regarding addressing adverse childhood and family experiences in Vermont. My name is Robyn Freedner-Maguire and I am the Campaign Director for Let's Grow Kids. Let's Grow Kids is committed to ensuring that all children, birth to five, have a strong start in life, and we recognize the important role that high-quality child care and early learning programs play in the lives of children and families, particularly those facing adverse experiences.

As this committee knows, the rapid brain development of children ages zero to five means that early childhood is a critical time in a child's life. Research has shown that "relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress response," meaning at least one supportive, caring relationship is critical.ⁱ Fortunately, Vermont's child care and early learning system has worked to build supports for children and families and increase provider knowledge and skills related to addressing the effects of adverse experiences, particularly through Vermont's work related to Strengthening Families™. Vermont has integrated the five Strengthening Families™ protective factors into the state's quality recognition and improvement system, known as STARS. Additionally, approximately 37 regulated early care and learning programs—serving over 1,300 children—currently receive Strengthening Families Child Care grants from Vermont's Department for Children and Families' Child Development Division to implement Strengthening Families™-informed practices including parent partnerships.ⁱⁱ Several of Vermont's Parent Child Centers are also involved in the coordination of Strengthening Families™ work in early care and learning programs, and we fully support increasing funding support for the important two-generational support that Parent Child Centers provide to Vermont communities. We appreciate the inclusion of Strengthening Families™ and funding for Parent Child Centers in S. 90, and I want to highlight other related issues that we encourage this committee to consider adding to the bill.

An important resource that helps children and families access high-quality early care and learning programs, including those participating in Strengthening Families™ is the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP). CCFAP provides child care tuition assistance to children from families who meet certain income, work, education, or health criteria and to children who are in foster care. However, CCFAP has been chronically underfunded for years, leaving more than a \$9.5 million funding gap in the program. This gap means that children and families do not always receive the tuition assistance they need to access quality early care and learning programs.

Additionally, Vermont's Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care recommended in their final report, issued in December, that the state undertake a process to evaluate, vision, design, and implement a more equitable, affordable, and higher-quality early care and learning

system for our state. We are hopeful that Building Bright Futures, Vermont's early childhood state advisory council to the Administration and Legislature, will undertake this process in the near future, and we would like to suggest that language be included in S. 90 that would ensure that any inventory or study process that results from this legislation engage with the early care and learning visioning process.

Vermont's early care and learning providers can play a critical role in providing stable, nurturing care for children facing adverse experiences and help to educate parents and families on how to build and strengthen protective factors. We encourage this committee to specifically incorporate Vermont's early care and learning system into this bill.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

ⁱ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (n.d.). *Key Concepts, Toxic Stress*. Retrieved from <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

ⁱⁱ Center for the Study of Social Policy. *Vermont Strengthening Families™: A Protective Factors Framework* (2016). <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/about/body/Vermont.pdf>