

Testimony in support of Special Accommodation Grants (SAG)

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My name is Matt Levin, and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance. Today I am asking you to continue funding for Special Accommodation Grants (SAG), a small program that is one of many efforts linked together through our state's innovative Children's Integrated Services network.

You'll hear about the need to fund the overall CIS program from others in these hearings and by other means.

The SAG program specifically makes it possible for children with special needs – medical, behavioral, social/emotional, etc. – to participate in child care programs.

With this extra support, children are then able to participate and benefit from high-quality early care and learning settings, and in turn, their parents are able to work.

We supported your efforts in the first FY20 Budget Adjustment Act, which restored \$153,000 in SAG funding – not full funding but enough for the program to continue. The SAG grants have always been in high demand across the state and the roughly \$350,000 in annual fiscal year funding that has traditionally been available was usually depleted by February or March.

These grants are still badly needed – despite, or maybe because of, the changes in the child care system brought about by the pandemic.

Given current budget realities, we ask that you include at least \$250,000 in funding for the SAG program in the FY21 budget.

This relatively small amount of funding would have a very large impact on the lives of many children and families. In one case that illustrates the impacts, SAG funds this summer have allowed a program in Chittenden County to hire an aide to provide intensive intervention so they are not faced with a terrible decision. With support of an aide, two children in their toddler room with significant behavioral issues will be able to heal and develop skills to ensure healthier and more productive long term outcomes for them.

Without funding, the provider could serve the two at the expense of the other eight in the classroom, or not serve the two knowing that they won't get the help they need and would disrupt the development of others.

The SAG funding will allow the provider to significantly improve outcomes for all ten students, their families, and the teachers working in the classroom.

[more]

A parent of another SAG recipient – “Alice” – testified earlier this year about the profound positive impact of the program.

The individual 1:1 aide on Alice’s team – supported by an SAG – is the glue that holds her Individual Education Plan (IEP) together. When Alice started at Lund, she was dependent on a feeding tube and could not sit independently. Now she is walking and running around, feeding herself, and her receptive language skills are starting to blossom – meaning she is just starting to understand and follow simple directions (or, choose not to, as kids often do). This wouldn’t be possible without individualized support.

But the SAG program isn’t just for children like Alice. Most of us who are adults today don’t recall much interaction with ‘special’ children when we were school aged beyond being told not to stare. Initially, we felt this was a ‘worst nightmare’ scenario; I think because we had so little exposure to children like Alice growing up. As long as this program is funded, Alice’s classmates will not suffer from that same empathy gap.

Where originally, we were most thankful that Alice’s 1:1 would mean she was ‘just included,’ we’ve come to learn that intentionally including students like Alice actually adds to the experience of ‘normal’ students and is a benefit to the community overall.

I hear almost daily from her classmates about how they love playing with her, and I observe them mimicking some of the same strategies that her 1:1 models to help her access what’s going on around her. They haven’t been instructed to do this – it’s just normal for them because it has been modeled by someone they trust.

Her classmates have taught us that we were aiming far too low when we thought that success for Alice is to ‘just’ be included. Largely because of this program, she is an active, contributing member of her community.

Please consider funding this important program in the FY21 budget.