



Date: Tuesday, September 15, 2020  
To: House Committee on Human Services  
Testimony From: Aly Richards, CEO  
Re: S.352 and S.353

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Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with the committee today about two bills recently passed by the Senate that would allocate much needed resources to the child care workforce. Let's Grow Kids is committed to making sure that all of our work in response to the current emergency adheres to two foundational principles:

- **Sustainability:** as we dive into details of solving immediate problems presented by COVID-19, we must make sure we are also setting a strong foundation for the future of child care in Vermont.
- **Equity:** the equitable child care system that we're all working toward must serve all children and ensure that services are accessible to those most in need, with an eye toward undoing historical oppression.

In this uncertain time, virtually every conversation our Let's Grow Kids staff have with early care and education (ECE) programs around the state opens with dire concerns about staffing. We've always had a significant ECE workforce shortage in Vermont, but the level of desperation is new and deeply concerning. From Orleans County to Bennington County, few programs have not been impacted.

- Programs are struggling to retain staff for a number of reasons, including:
  - Staff who are in higher COVID-19 risk categories themselves,
  - Staff who have children or other family members at risk, and
  - Staff who can't work because of school-age children with remote or hybrid school schedules.
- Programs are struggling to recruit staff, because of historically low rates of pay and the inability to offer benefits like health insurance, which are especially important during a pandemic.
- These concerns are compounded by necessary health guidelines that prevent any staff from coming to work if they have any symptoms that could be associated with COVID-19, which means that substitutes are in very high demand and very short supply.
- Finally, the historic inequities faced by so many early childhood educators have created instability in this field and have been dramatically compounded by the pandemic.

When the Legislature allocated \$12 million in June for additional restart grants for child care and afterschool, and support for Parent Child Centers and Children's Integrated Services, many were hopeful that those funds could be used to provide temporary, additional pay to help

offset costs of COVID, including health care costs and child care costs for employees. Unfortunately, the guidance provided to the Department for Children and Families did not allow those uses under the Operational Relief Grants that the department rolled out late this summer.

Two bills just passed by the Senate attempt to alleviate some of this pressure.

- **S. 352:** The first bill makes technical amendments to the existing Front-line Employees Hazard Pay Grant Program. Section 3 of S.352 contains language to allow DCF to use the \$12 million allocated in June to create “a prospective workforce stabilization program for staff employed at child care programs regulated by the Department for Children and Families for risks associated with elevated exposure to COVID-19.”
  - This would allow DCF to provide additional financial resources for child care workers who are working or are newly hired by a certain date. As we understand it, these funds would flow from DCF to child care programs, which would apply for the funds on behalf of their staff. Programs would then pay the funds out to staff.
  - Because the parameters on the Operational Relief Grants for child care programs were so restrictive, DCF expects that the approved applications will amount to less than the \$12 million that the Legislature provided for child care, afterschool, Parent Child Centers, and Children’s Integrated Services. This new use would be an appropriate way to direct those remaining funds to the staff who are making care possible under very difficult conditions.
  - Let’s Grow Kids supports this proposal. We have been advocating since spring that CRF funds be used for direct supports for early educators working on the frontlines during the remainder of the year, and this proposal accomplishes that.
  - It will be important to ensure that the other uses of the funds outlined in H.965 are preserved—supporting Parent Child Centers that have been meeting families’ basic needs and Children’s Integrated Services that have been providing critical supports for children with specialized needs and their families.
  
- **S. 353:** The second bill would expand the current hazard pay program to include a more expansive list of workers, including people who worked in child care facilities from March 13 to May 15 providing care to children of essential workers. We are gratified to hear that the Joint Fiscal Office and Legislative Council feel more confident that these are allowable CRF expenses. This will be very welcome news to all the child care workers who cared for children during those especially frightening early months of the pandemic.
  - It is our understanding that, since the language is structured around the statutory definition of child care facility, this would also apply to any afterschool program regulated by CDD that was providing care for children of essential workers.

Although neither of these proposals will provide long-term sustainability in terms of wages or supports for early childhood educators, they are key to sustaining the field in this moment of crisis and represent a small step toward providing more equitable supports for those teaching and nurturing our youngest children.