



Date: May 8, 2020  
To: Chair Lyons and the Senate Health and Welfare Committee  
Chair Pugh and the House Human Services Committee  
From: Beth Truzansky, Deputy Director, Building Bright Futures  
Re: Childcare Services during the COVID-19 emergency

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to your committee this week with regard to Building Bright Futures (BBF) role in the early childhood system. My name is Beth Truzansky, the Deputy Director of Building Bright Futures. This memo includes an overview of Building Bright Futures responsibilities under Act 104 and our response to the COVID-19 pandemic for the field of early childhood and more specifically, supporting our public and private partners in response to childcare needs and now the shifting to a reopening period.

### **Building Bright Futures**

Our role hasn't changed during this crisis. Our responsibility is to support communities by identifying their needs, and gaps within the early childhood service system and bringing people together to strategize and take action within regions and at the state level. Our job is also to make sure all of our different early childhood partners are working together and coordinating to meet the needs of families. AND just as important, directly connecting with our agency partners and other decision-makers to make sure they understand the questions, concerns and needs of those on the ground. A good example of this is the webinar on the reopening of childcare we hosted today attended by nearly 600 early childhood educators and stakeholders. We are also ensuring that we're disseminating guidance from our agency partner.

**One of the things I'd like to stress, is that the early childhood service system is complex. Child care is situated among a range of other supports and services for children and families. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance and critical nature of a mixed delivery model of child care.** Since the start of the COVID-10 emergency, BBF has been closely monitoring and documenting the gaps, needs, questions, concerns and strategies emerging from families, communities, regions and statewide partners. The following early childhood themes and priorities have emerged statewide within the first few weeks (this is not exhaustive list, but top themes emerging in no particular order):

### **Early Childhood Emerging Themes & Priorities**



This is an initial list of concerns we are hearing most frequently related to the wellbeing of children and families (in no particular order). These themes are connected and important to consider when we think about the broader early childhood service system in relation to child care.

1. Child care: until now, the concern has been on access to emergency child care for essential workers, financial support for child care programs and families during the child care closure period and now the concerns are on the personal and financial feasibility, and preparation for re-opening
2. Food security and basic needs: access to food and basic needs such as diapers, wipes, and baby formula. Concern for the growing reliance on food shelves and their limited capacity continues to be a concern across the state, and need to help families access existing supports through WIC/3Squares and school food programs
3. Family safety and mental health; the challenges for caregivers to take care of themselves and children in their care; how to get help, isolation and connection with other adults, mounting economic pressure on parents; risk for domestic violence and abuse as well as substance misuse; long term impacts of the trauma and transition anxiety on the re-opening of society
4. Health care: access to health insurance for all children and families, health care and health insurance for early educators serving children of essential employees, telehealth access for children and families, concerns for pregnant and postpartum women (access to lactation, home visiting and mental health supports), challenges for families with children with special health needs
5. Technology: limited or no connectivity for families in rural areas, no access to a phone or computer, additional remote learning needs, Zoom fatigue, WIFI and training for providers now providing services via phone/computer
6. Distance learning: support for educators, children and families in distance educating and remote learning, appropriate expectations
7. Reopening/recovery: clear guidance and expectations for the process of reopening Vermont and the safety measures that will remain

**This pandemic isn't necessarily just bringing up entirely new issues but highlighting challenges and gaps in our current system.**

**Perspectives from the field:  
Successes and persistent challenges in child care**

**WHERE WE'VE COME FROM**



## **Vermont's evolving challenges with child care**

1. Financial Concerns
  - a. Concerns from child care programs about their ability to make payroll, continue paying rent and utilities, etc.
  - b. Continued confusion on how to bill/submit invoices, getting paid for the stability program and now transitioning to the restart grant program.
  - c. Lack of clarity around how different funding streams may be applied to families (CCFAP, preK)
  - d. Been very vocal with partners about the financial challenges and concerns
2. Family Concerns
  - a. Families are both eager and anxious about the reopening process. The mental health challenges are real and show up in many different ways. Families are expressing transition anxiety about sending their children back to childcare
  - b. Concern about if programs are open, if there is capacity to meet family needs for childcare, and for those who were un-enrollment, will their space be available to them when they need to go back to work.
3. Health Concerns
  - a. Programs have raised health and safety concerns for teachers and staff in centers and homes. The Child Development Division and the Vermont Department of Health have been responsive to this concern in creating joint guidance and webinars.
4. Clear and consistent communication
  - a. Programs and providers have been hesitant to make decisions and disseminate information to families due to the weekly guidelines updates.
  - b. The field has strongly requested clarity on the guidance and FAQs, and for those documents to be written in an accessible way. In effort to respond to these needs, BBF and the Child Development Division have partnered to host a weekly Early Childhood Forum on Child Care to provide the field with direct access to agency partners to ask questions and receive up-to-date information.

**I don't want us to lose a focus on the successes during this period as well.**

## **Vermont's child care successes**



1. Vermont has mobilized quickly to respond to the needs of children and families, especially the emergency child care needs of essential persons, in addition to designing a plan to ensure child care programs are able to reopen their doors once this has ended.
2. Vermont has utilized existing partners and the existing child care referral system to develop a new child care system and process in a short period of time. We now need to close the gaps and focus on implementation.
3. There have been incredible cross-agency, cross-sector, public-private partnerships and communication emerging.
4. The state has truly recognized the importance of child care as an essential.

**We've focused, and rightly so on emergency response. What happens in the here and now. Now I'd like to transition to where I see us headed as we look to the future. Not just re-opening, but thinking about what continuity of learning looks like.**

### **Future Directions**

1. True need for cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration to strategize reopening that engages the public as much as possible
2. Mindfulness of Health and Safety - partnership with VDH and Director of Maternal and Child Health to ensure appropriate procedures
3. As we reopen:
  - a. Supporting children and families with access to child care and preK
  - b. Supporting child care providers with all components of reopening
  - c. Family-facing documents addressing health and safety
  - d. Clear guidance for child care programs about health and safety
  - e. Need for additional resources on mental health both for children, families and child care providers
  - f. Planning around supply needs during reopening given health and safety guidelines
4. Thinking about Continuity of Learning - What does this look like in the 0-5 arena and preK to support this critical period of development? How do we support sub-groups and sub-topics (Below)
  - a. Children with disabilities and special health care needs
  - b. English language learners
  - c. Supporting mental health needs of children, families, providers and educators
5. Technology Needs - IT, infrastructure, connectivity



6. Continued forums to disseminate guidance and updates as well as providing a direct opportunity for folks on the ground to elevate needs and questions, creating opportunities for shared experience
7. Clear and persistent communication/guidance as we reopen Vermont

It takes a lot of partnership to have moved as quickly as we did as a state, but also the recognition that it's not perfect and we can always do better. Thank you for holding the importance of doing what's best for the child at the forefront of all decision-making.