

## House Human Services Committee

### Testimony of Claire Kendall, Family Center of Washington County

#### On behalf of the Parent Child Center Network

#### RE: Governor's Proposed Restatement Budget – Childcare Eligibility, Resource & Referral

August 27, 2020

*The Parent Child Center Network is opposed to the proposed changes to the CCFAP program in the Governor's recommended budget. We ask your committee to also oppose these changes. Below are some of the impacts we have identified with this change, which is not only a budgetary change, but also a policy change that will impact families and childcare providers. Parent Child Centers and other providers have spent significant time building relationships with DCF/FSD to ensure families get access to programming based on their eligibility - this is now a good system that works well and would have to be completely overhauled in the middle of a pandemic where things are already so much more challenging for families*

The proposal to shift childcare eligibility, resource and referral services to ESD would take away this locally known and locally accessed service that is embedded and integrated in communities, and it could be disastrous. Community Based Child Care Referral Specialists were vital during the COVID School and Childcare shutdown, when hundreds of Essential Workers were able to access essential child care slots because Community Child Care Referral Specialists worked round the clock, 7 days a week reaching out to childcare providers to secure slots for essential workers. These community-based staff were able to match families with providers so that Vermont essential workers could work, knowing that their children would be taken care of.

Families with young children who need to work or enroll in training or educational programs often have multiple needs that are met via the one-stop-shop of Parent Child Centers or other community-based host agencies. A family may walk in the door needing help finding or paying for childcare, and then they are connected with multiple other family resources, supports and referral services. That one-stop-shop approach will deteriorate if these services are moved into ESD.

#### **IMPACTS ON FAMILIES**

If accepted by the Legislature, this would introduce a profound change of Vermont's social policy as it applies to young families. As it is now, the policy is to determine eligibility for childcare subsidy through a local provider that serves families holistically and helps them access other services and supports. In effect, by moving the program from where it currently sits – at CDD – to ESD and eliminating the positions at CDD that oversee the program, DCF is shifting away from a system that considers not just eligibility for child care subsidy, but takes a multi-generational, family-centered approach to each family whether they are eligible or not.

Applying for childcare subsidy is often the first time a young family touches the Human Services system of care. When families are applying, they often share much more information than what is needed to determine eligibility, which allows the local specialist to get them connected to many supports and services that might not otherwise be identified. Families often feel less comfortable sharing personal and family issues with state staff because of the fear associated with the power of the state and sometimes the stigma associated with state services. Parent Child Centers and other local providers can offer a warm, welcoming and judgment free place where families can share their concerns, struggles and barriers and get connected to the help they need. They will also find a home at the Parent Child Center that they can come back to for other supports and services as they need them.

Due to the pandemic many families have been accessing these services for the first time, with layers of stressors such as: loss of employment, reduced school hours, loss of child engagement activities from community partners, reduction of people's salaries. They are often embarrassed and stressed when they seek help. We are well equipped to draw out their issues and address their needs with our strengthening families framework.

CCFAP, Referral and Specialized CCFAP are integrated with CIS at the regional level and that works for children and families. It is critical that these services are connected to the CIS service in order to keep quality services that are accessible and family friendly and to ensure better outcomes and seamless integration. If these functions are moved into ESD, that CIS connection is likely to be lost, which will mean that families are not getting the integrated services that their children need.

Accessibility is an issue for families. Currently, families just “pop” in to get paperwork, drop off paperwork, ask questions etc. If they must go to the state building, parking is a bigger issue, having to go through metal detectors, or not feeling comfortable in the same building as FSD because they have an open case, etc. So many families with this program come in for childcare and end up getting many more services like diapers, CIS referrals, playgroup info, etc. They will not receive this information in the same way or be connected to their local PCC in the same way, and this could significantly impact families' access to other programming.

We work with the families to make sure they actually access the services they need, for instance, going back and forth with them and other services providers to make sure they have all their paperwork in, to help them access family support, childcare or other CIS services. We are concerned that families will fall through the cracks without this wrap around approach that community providers are committed to.

Our Specialists and CIS CCC work closely together to ensure families are not "dropped" from one service need to another. The "warm handoff" that the State demands to ensure continuity for families is based on clear communication and timely transitions. The CIS CCC Specialist in each county needs access to FAP files as their work overseeing Child With Special Health Needs, Family Support and Protective Service Child Care are all processed under FAP guidelines and policies.

In 2011 the CDD thought of moving these divisions to ESD and it was deemed on many levels a poor idea with many flaws and potential negative impacts to families. We would ask now:

- What has changed, especially during a pandemic?
- What process have been developed to ensure a smooth continuity for families and providers?
- What accommodations are in place for ESD workers to learn of and develop relationships with all of the support workers who assist families throughout our community?
- How will this workload be distributed among the current State work force and what work has DCF has done to anticipate and mitigate the impact on Vermont families?
  - Currently, there are 21 Child Care Financial Assistance Eligibility Specialists around the State. Each one handles an average between 350-400 cases per year. They process over 10,000 applications/year.

### **IMPACTS ON CHILDCARE PROVIDERS**

Childcare providers operate on a thin margin and CCFAP eligibility determination for families and regular payments must be in place for providers to operate. In order for these smooth operations to happen, childcare providers need prompt confirmation as to where families are at in their eligibility determination, before assigning a secured childcare slot. It is critical to know payment is in place before admitting a child, and parents often urgently need the child to begin attending a program to secure employment.

The BFIS state data base system is difficult to use and childcare providers often rely on local support from local CCFAP specialists with questions around invoicing and family eligibility and determination.

Childcare providers are strapped for time working all day with children and little breaks and need access to local specialists to get the supports they need. Our community-based specialists know them and are frequently communicating through email and phone to ensure they have what they need so they can bill appropriately and get paid.

We are concerned that this will be one too many changes for childcare providers at this critical time, and we'll see more people close their doors. Everything is in a state of flux right now in this sector, and these providers were on the edge before the pandemic struck.

#### **FINANCIAL IMPACTS FOR PARENT CHILD CENTERS - \$616,898 total**

- Family Center of Washington County would lose \$151,162/year
  - \$117,234 CCFAP & \$33,928 referral; approx 2.5 FTE's
- Springfield Area Parent Child Center would lose \$79,986/year
  - \$16,734 for referral and \$63,252 for CCFAP). Approx 1.2 FTEs
- Sunrise would lose \$102,000/year.
  - Approx 1.5 FTEs and also this contract pays overhead and if it isn't in place it causes other services to cost more because overhead has to be redistributed
- Parent Child Center of NCSS will lose \$130,862/year
  - \$104,514 for CCFAP and \$26,312 for referral. Approx 2 FTEs
- Lamoille Family Center will lose \$85,844 annually.
  - It has been level funded for many years. \$7,804 is spent on administrative costs. \$3,000 is spent on occupancy costs, which would have to be absorbed by all other programs, increasing their cost. That leaves about \$75,000, which covers salaries.
- NEKCA North Parent Child Center would lose \$51,013 per year
  - \$45,626 for CCFAP, \$5,387 referrals. One FTE - this position has been level funded for quite a while and we have had the same staff member in this role since at least 2017. She is the hub for Orleans and Northern Essex - the most rural Counties in Vermont.
- The Family Place would lose \$101,875 per year
  - 1.5 FTE; and similar to Sunrise's comments about overhead.



# Websterville Christian Academy

## Little Flock Nursery

*Distinctively Different by Design*

P.O. Box 1, 143 Church Hill Rd. Websterville, Vt. 05678 · (802)-479-0141

August 25, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

I would like to express my deep appreciation for the efforts made by the local Parent/Child Centers and their staff members. Throughout my time as the director of an early childcare center, I have heard numerous parents express their appreciation for the services which they receive. They make comments like: "I will call my eligibility specialist right away" or "I will message JoAnne or Felicia or (another staff member name); they **know** me and my circumstances." It has been amazing to see the connections these individuals have with the families in our community.

Community service has long been a passion of mine. Prior to becoming the director of our childcare facility, it was my privilege to serve as a home/school coordinator for one of the large public schools in our area. This was an opportunity for me to support the families in our community. There was great success in assisting the parents and guardians with finding the resources needed- physically, economically, and emotionally. During my time in this position, I was in frequent contact with the *Family Center of Washington County* which provided, and continues to provide, compassionate and direct support to our local families. If there is a family in need of the essential basics, such as diapers, winter clothing, food, gas cards, or phone services, this center is an excellent resource. In a time in which people struggle to trust and are filled with anxiety, the local center is a safe resource for them to make a connection to; a place where they feel accepted and grow.

The motto of the *Family Center of Washington County* states their mission: "Nothing is more important than family." May I encourage you to reconsider the folding of this essential and local service into the Economic Services? While I continue to be grateful for the State of Vermont and the Economic Services Division, it is of utmost importance that we maintain the local connection of our Parent Child Center. Families build our community, and our community continues to grow with the strengthening of our families. Let us continue to work together for the good of all.

Sincerely,

*Dianna D. Fecher*, Director

Little Flock Nursery and Preschool

To Whom It May Concern,

I wish it was as easy as saying "Please don't take our Family Center away!!"

But since I know it isn't, I will tell you why we need them and count on them everyday!

The Family Center of Washington (and I speak of Washington County because this is MY Family Center but I stand behind all of Vermonts Family Centers) is a life line, life support system, heartbeat for child care providers, parents, community members, families in need of advice, help or just an ear to listen. They are a VITAL entity in our lives, our communities, and to our businesses of childcare.

I cannot even tell you how many times over the past 30 years of being in the childcare field that I said "Call the Family Center." "Have you called the Family Center?" "Check with the Family Center." How did you hear about us? The Family Center?"

Just as I think about it, I cannot even think about not being able to say those words... Where will we be without our local resource person, Joanne and Kelley who know us personally and goes out of their way to make sure the referrals they give us are solid and also follows up to make sure they are. They work long hours and will even call you at night, after our business hours, to talk to us because they know thats convenient for US!!!

They go above and beyond always!

I have been involved with the Family Center and seen the transformation over 3 decades and they just keep getting better and better.

I've taken classes there way back when they were on College Street, got my EMP license, I worked evenings providing childcare to participants children so they could take a parenting course, I did observations there to achieve my CDA. I was a Provider Group Leader for over 10 years and the list goes on and on and on

Long story short.....the Family Centers are our heartbeat and we will always need them and count on them to be the best we can be and to run our businesses seamlessly.

So, please keep things as they are...we have had enough disruption and upheaval this year with this virus, we don't need or welcome another change!!

Don't take away MY FAMILY CENTER!!!

A local, long standing childcare provider,  
Vicki Langevin  
Jacks Place, Barre