

Testimony to House Appropriations Committee

January 10, 2020

**Judy Harvey, Coordinator at Lund's Early Childhood Education Program
Special Accommodations Grants Funding**

Hello. My name is Judy Harvey and I am the program coordinator at Lund's Early Childhood Education Program. Our program is a therapeutic child care center embedded in a Parent Child Center, and we are a 5 STAR program in Vermont's Step ahead recognition program. Special Accommodation Grants are critical supports for children who may not otherwise be able to attend an early education program due to medical needs or intense behavioral issues. Without such support, children may need to leave programs in order to maintain safety for everyone.

Lund has seen the positive impact these funds can have in promoting optimum development for children, particularly children who have significant and complex needs and who are most at risk. We learned this fall, however, that the Department for Children and Families is no longer able to financially support many of the children and families in need with this funding. When the funds are not available, devastating consequences will occur, as in the case of Johnny (not his name – protecting identity), a now 3-year-old child.

We first met Johnny as an infant and knew immediately that he was a bright, engaging, sweet child. We also knew that he needed a lot of extra care. He was frequently dysregulated – he could not take comfort or be soothed as easily as most children his age. He would cry, scream and need a lot of time on a teacher's lap to calm down after experiencing something he found challenging or often, for reasons we could not ascertain. As he got older, we began to understand more about his traumatic background and that he did not see the world as a safe place. He was unable to follow directions and did not meet the expectations that we had for a child his age.

Emotionally, he continued to present as a 14-18 month old, even as he was nearing the age of 3. His anguish led to him to act out in increasingly violent ways. By the time he was 2, he was having a significant and serious impact on the physical and emotional safety of other children in the classroom. He would yell, hit, kick, spit and bite his teachers and the other children, as well as unexpectedly throw objects at those around him. We consulted with partners such as the Specialized Services Consultation Team to identify possible triggers, supportive interventions and alternative ways to set up the environment to promote his emotional growth. We worked with the family and made referrals for evaluations, including Howard Center services for the family, to identify and begin treatment for this child, who was clearly suffering.

We made accommodations that, although not sustainable, would help us maintain him in our program until we could apply for and receive a Special Accommodations grant so that he could transition to our preschool in August 2019. We were not prepared to give up on Johnny and this family. We knew that our center was the best place for him and were ready to do everything necessary to keep him with us. We did not receive the grant, however, in time for the start of the school year, and were not able to support him and keep the classroom safe. The

family chose to try another placement because the mother needed to work and she could not wait any longer.

Within two weeks, I received phone calls from his new childcare, his father and the Howard Center team because he was exhibiting the same behaviors as were seen in our center and the center needed help applying for a SAG. However, we had just received word that the funding was suspended for the rest of the year. I have since heard that he has been asked to leave two programs because of his unsafe behaviors.

This is heartbreakingly unnecessary and has serious consequences for this child. He is smart, bright, and can be very engaging. However, his emotional needs are intense and their physical manifestation created an unsafe environment. Lund is well equipped to work with children who have experienced trauma. We are a high quality childcare center and implement strategies and research driven supports to provide interventions for children with traumatic backgrounds. This is not always enough. There are children like Johnny out there who, with a supportive one on one assistant who can partner with the family, the center and the treatment provider to provide targeted intervention and treatment, can heal and reach their full potential.

Such interventions can change the trajectory of their lives but in order to be most effective, they have to happen in early childhood. The window for Johnny and others like him who are no longer able to access the SAG funding is rapidly closing.

I urge you to restore adequate funding in the FY20 budget to ensure that Special Accommodations Grants are available to the many young children and families across the state who are in need of this support right now.