

House Appropriations Committee Testimony

January 10, 2020

Sharon Halnon, Child Care Resource -- Chittenden County CIS Child Care Coordinator Regarding Special Accommodations Grants Funding

My name is Sharon Halnon. I am the Children's Integrated Services Specialized Child Care Coordinator for Chittenden County.

One aspect of my work is to provide support to licensed and registered child care providers and their enrolled families as they do the hard work caring for children.

For many years the AHS Child Development Division has invited qualified child care programs to apply for the Special Accommodations Grant, which provides funding to assist in supporting individual children with special needs. I am here today to request this crucial funding be reinstated.

It's important to know that Child Care Programs must meet certain requirements to even be eligible to apply for these grants. This includes being awarded something called Specialized Child Care status which requires additional training and a signed Agreement with the Child Development Division. In short, these are your invested center-based and family home programs that have already taken extra steps to provide higher quality child care- these are your 3-5 STAR programs.

Most often these Grants provide help for a program to hire a 1:1 aide for specific children, for example for a child requiring a feeding tube, a child on the autism spectrum or a child who has experienced trauma and is exhibiting behavioral challenges that require extra support to stay safe in the child care setting. The 1:1 aide position allows the lead teachers the resources needed to provide the appropriate level of care required for these children while also caring for the classroom as a whole.

The SA Grant was one of the few supports currently available to these programs as they provided this important Specialized Child Care. Often they matched this funding with their program dollars to make it last.

This grant funding has not only helped make it possible for child care programs to provide appropriate care for a child with higher needs, it also helped maintain the stability of the classroom as a whole, so that every child's needs were met.

For families, it provides peace of mind so they can go to their jobs and not worry about getting that call that their child is struggling and may need to be picked up early or worse, is asked to leave the program permanently because of continued unsafe behavior.

I have had many discussions with my counterparts across the State. One fellow CC Coordinator recently pointed out that due to the shortage of available childcare spaces in general, we are all seeing an increase in concentration of children with higher needs in the programs that are available. These higher numbers impact available programs' capacity to adequately meet each child's needs, especially without the SA Grant support.

In conclusion, I ask that you reconsider the funding cut for the Specialized Accommodation Grants for this year at minimum, so that our most vulnerable children have the continuity of care they require to be healthy, so their parents, foster parents and guardians can continue to work and provide for them, so that dedicated child care providers can continue to meet the needs of those in their care.

Over the past 14 years in my position, i have spoken to parents who are passionate about finding the best environment for their child, I have spoken with hundreds of child care providers who are passionate about the quality of care they provide. BUT passion alone cannot provide the resources that are required to sustain this important work. Vermont has worked hard to improve childcare program quality, we continue to work hard to address childcare capacity issues and we cannot then ignore the tools and resources required for sustaining quality providers and programs.

Thank you for your time.