

Representative Pugh and Members of the Committee on Human Services:

Thank you for taking time to hear my story. Like most vignettes shared – I am here to tell a tale of hope, promise, a little luck, grueling work, and supports like grants being available at the right time.

My name is Katie Gonyaw, and I am the Director of Ascension Childcare, Inc. Ascension is an early education center that has been providing high quality, early education services for 30 years. ACC has supported over 2000 children. We are NAEYC accredited and have 5 STARS through the Step Ahead Recognition System. We are known for our work with all families and children, but especially children who are at risk, children with developmental and health needs, and children with challenging behaviors.

We serve the broader community by providing community training for families and educators; we are registered as a Universal Pre-K; we are a learning partner with Champlain College students; we partner with organizations like the Howard Center, Vermont Family Network, EEE, and Lund to support families with wrap around services. We are active in community organizations including Rotary, VCCICC, local sporting teams, and schools.

We support our local economy. Our reliable service allows 120 people to go to work each day. Some are employees, some are employers – there is a ripple effect. Our annual budget is 1.1 million dollars of which 82% goes to payroll and benefits to support our 24 employees, 2% of our budget goes to scholarship and the remainder of our budget goes to programming (5%), occupancy (7%), and administration (4%). Our minimum wage is \$15.00 an hour

I pause, because just 6 years ago when I came to testify – this information read differently. We were a small school serving 32 children nestled in the woods. We served 22 families and had 12 employees. Our budget was \$400,000.

Since November of 2013, we moved and expanded our service to children by adding 53 slots: 30 precious infant and toddler slots and 23 preschool/pre-k slots. We are now licensed to serve 85 children each day. We strive to create a vibrant learning community that is homey and feels like visiting grandparents, but is steeped in good practice, fun, and learning.

How did we get here? One might think that this was a graceful and planned process. While we had a plan in place for many years – when it came time to move things it happened quite quickly because of grants in place at the Child Development Division, and community organizations.

It was an emergency...

It is not every day you learn from your mom that your business is losing their lease. But that is how it happened. My mom received a dear parishioner letter stating that the child

care's lease was ending and the school would be moved within six months. As you might imagine it was quite an animated telephone call as this was news to me. We knew the time was coming to part ways, but we anticipated having at least 12 to 18 months to plan. The disagreements were about locking doors for safety after Sandy Hook, requests for maintenance, light bulbs with mercury, and floods...

The need to move quickly with only \$30,000.00 made our task seem hopeless. We only had the money because of damage from a flood. How were we going to find a new home, permit it, fit the space to an early education setting and move in six months? We had to get water permits and capacity in Chittenden County.

Did you know that there is a water usage chart at the Department of Environmental Conservation and it figures that each child uses over 16 gallons of water a day? To access the gallon of water there must be capacity and it costs \$16.31 per potential gallon at start up. According to our plan, we needed 1575 gallons of water a day and the upfront cost was over \$25,000.00. Not a normal cost for most small business expansion. In theory, we were out of savings before we started to move.

Then there was mold and our old space was condemned, even a greater emergency – health and safety. Was our gem of a school going to survive?

We were longstanding collaborators, and we were a non-profit -so we were lucky. We were eligible for grants and we were a known entity so while there was risk – it was calculated. Because of our work in the past and our commitment to growth and quality, and yes, the quick end to our lease and the mold – we were fortunate to be approved for an emergency grant allowed us to move and fit up a new space. The grants had been established a few years earlier to help a school in the North East Kingdom. Without that grant, that funding, we would not be having this conversation. ACC would be that nice little school that was. This was not how we intended things to go, but we had worked hard, and made a difference to the community along the way, so the grant seemed to be a good fit.

Recently, we took the plunge again and were a recipient of a Make Way for Kids Grant. In this instance, we had space to expand and we had a little experience with building projects. We had maintained our quality standards since the move and there was a continued need to access high quality care in the community. This time we were able to expand using a more thoughtful approach. Still, without grant funding, we would not have had the funds to expand. Even in expansion there is risk. We would have continued on as we were putting effort into the children, the families, the teachers and our work. There was little left in our bottom line to think about plumbing and natural light.

Having grant funding in a field of work where there is little capital left at the end of a day and the year is essential to continued growth and vibrancy. Yes, grants of any amount when used towards growth, the children, or training are investments that compound in a positive way. Not only do they add value to our service to children but to the vitality of the business.

This is a field that is highly regulated, and is responsible for our most vulnerable humans. Much energy goes into meeting the children's needs while honoring the system in which we work. These are complex systems with many competing priorities that are often stunted by small margins and a lack of business supports. The burden of regulation and the lack of qualified teachers are barriers to growth. Grants are beacons of hope, ways to bring energy into the field and stir vision.

Vermont honors entrepreneurs, but doesn't often look at early education as entrepreneurial or even as small-business. Like many small businesses people- we are creative, frugal, committed, and dedicated. Like other small businesses, it is difficult to take risk - the needs of families are tied directly to our work. Our customers are hyper sensitive to changes in the product and market. There is no safety net. We cannot change the cost of goods to make up for an error in judgement. To take calculated risks in growing excellence -business development grants should be available. We do this for breweries and farmers having set funds for growing opportunities to serve small children will strengthen the State. When the foundation is stable, it supports the building and growth of communities.

I realize that there will not be grants for everyone and there is not a one size fits all solution - but I hope there might be some understanding that these small businesses help to create a sense of place in our growing world. Not only do these schools concentrate on brain development and outcomes for children, they help people feel like they belong and support people when they are in need.

Maybe there can be more stories like ours - of hope, of promise, of a little luck, and the great opportunities that well placed, defined grants can bring to organizations - especially organizations that pay it forward. And maybe, doing great work- smart work instead of grueling work can continue preserve high quality opportunities for our young children. We might all be more successful - especially with a little help from friends.

Respectfully,

Katie Gonyaw M.Ed.
Ascension Childcare, Inc

