Let's Grow Kids' 2019 Legislative Action Agenda

Strengthening the Foundation of Vermont's Early Care and Learning System

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About Let's Grow Kids

Let's Grow Kids is a statewide movement to make Vermont the best place to raise a family, and our mission is to ensure affordable access to high-quality child care for all Vermont families by 2025. This mission may look familiar to you if you're familiar with the Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children or Vermont Birth to Five. In fact, we've always been three parts of the same organization working toward the same mission and united under one Board and 501(c)3. In the past year, we have fully integrated our work, and now we have one name too: Let's Grow Kids. Together, our organization has over 30,000 Vermonters who support our mission. That number is growing and it includes parents, early educators, business and health care leaders, community partners and others who share our vision and mission for Vermont's children and our future.

Let's Grow Kids | 19 Marble Ave, Suite 4 | Burlington, VT 05401 | www.letsgrowkids.org

Contact Sarah Kenney, Senior Director of Policy
sarah@letsgrowkids.org or 802-735-2205
with questions about Let's Grow Kids' 2019 Legislative Action Agenda

Executive Summary

Vermont is facing a demographic crisis that is exacerbated by a lack of access to quality and affordable child care and early learning programs for Vermont families. This burden is among the biggest challenges young Vermont families face when working and raising a family in Vermont. Vermont's economic prosperity relies on its most important asset: Vermonters. To create a thriving economy today and for the future, employers must have access to a robust, stable and dedicated workforce. Bold action is necessary to address this issue if we are to retain and attract more people to live in our state.

Our state's population is one of the oldest in the nation.[1] On top of that, Vermont has the lowest birth rate of any state in the country.[2] It's essential to the health of our businesses, communities and economy that we grow our population, especially young families. To accomplish this critical goal, we must ensure they have the child care and early learning programs needed to support their growing families.

The facts are alarming: more than half of infants and toddlers likely to need child care in Vermont do not have access to regulated child care or early learning programs.[3] And, shockingly, families earning the median Vermont family wage ($86,315) with two young children are spending almost 30% of their gross income on child care.[4] Additionally, early educators—those individuals responsible for supporting parents in nurturing and teaching our youngest Vermonters—earn low wages. For Vermont child care workers, the median wage is $26,440—less than Vermont's livable wage.[5,6] This is not sustainable for families or early educators, and it is not acceptable for our children. We must act to make significant gains to address this crisis if we intend to make progress toward addressing our demographic challenges.

Let's Grow Kids is supporting a forward-thinking approach to this challenge that will deliver meaningful improvements to enhance financial benefits for working families, improve quality, increase the availability of care and support early educators.

Our 2019 legislative action agenda contains concrete policy changes that will move us closer to our goal of high-quality, affordable child care for all Vermont families. This is the result of years of work by a diverse coalition of stakeholders and partners who have invested countless hours of time and resources to understand this complex challenge. We have developed policy proposals that are supported by research and facts to ensure this work provides significant and meaningful change for the children and families who need it most. These foundational elements will ensure that:

- More children have access to high-quality, affordable child care;
- Child care is more affordable for more Vermont families;
- Child care and early learning programs are paid fair rates for the care and education they provide;
- Vermont can attract and retain talented early educators;
- Employers are engaged partners in Vermont's early care and learning system; and
- Dedicated funding is available for Vermont's early care and learning system.

The time to act is now. Vermont simply cannot afford to wait.

Background

Over the past several years, the Vermont Legislature and the executive branch, in partnership with Let's Grow Kids and other stakeholders, have been working to create a future system that ensures all Vermont families have access to high-quality, affordable early care and learning.

In 2015, the Vermont Legislature passed Act 58 to create the Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care. The Commission was tasked with evaluating Vermont's current system for early care and learning and making recommendations for a future system.

In late 2016, the Commission published a final report that included the following recommendations:

- **Make immediate, incremental investments in Vermont's early care and learning system:** The state should increase funding for Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) and other key programs; and
- **Work with community members to envision a future system:** Building Bright Futures, the state's public–private early childhood partnership and designated early childhood advisor to the governor and Legislature, should lead a process to design and implement Vermont's future early care and learning system.

Based on these recommendations, the Vermont Legislature has made incremental progress to strengthen our current system while Building Bright Futures convened partners to envision a future system. During the last biennium, the Vermont Legislature appropriated modest increases for CCFAP and launched a grant program for child care and early learning programs that accept children who receive support from CCFAP.

At the same time, Building Bright Futures launched a process called Building Vermont's Future from the Child Up to gather feedback from Vermont families, early educators, state and community agencies, business representatives, and community members on what they need in an early care and learning system. Based on findings from interviews, focus groups and a statewide two-day summit, Building Bright Futures formed a group of key stakeholders to formulate a blueprint for Vermont's future system. This group, known as the Building Vermont's Future from the Child Up Think Tank (Think Tank), released their recommendations on the first day of the 2019 Legislature.

2019 Policy Recommendations

Based on the work of the Blue Ribbon Commission, Summit and Think Tank, this year we are proposing foundational policy changes to ensure that:

- More children have access to high-quality, affordable child care;
- Child care is more affordable for more Vermont families;
- Child care and early learning programs are paid fair rates for the care and education they provide;
- Vermont can attract and retain talented early educators;
- Employers are engaged partners in Vermont's early care and learning system; and
- Dedicated funding is available for Vermont's early care and learning system.

Legislative Priority 1: Strengthen Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program

Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) is an important resource for lower- and middle-income families to help them access and afford quality early care and learning programs. The program is available to children in protective custody and children whose families qualify based on income and a work, education, health or other qualifying need. Families receive financial assistance based on a sliding scale that accounts for family size. This year, we are recommending three key changes to the program to recalibrate our state's core commitment to child care.

Expand the Number of Children Eligible for Support

Per the recommendation of the Blue Ribbon Commission and the Think Tank, the income eligibility criteria for CCFAP should be expanded. Currently, only children from families earning up to 300% of the 2018 federal poverty guidelines are eligible for the program.[a] For a four-person family, this equals $75,300. While this may seem high, families with two young children who earn the median income for a 4-person family in Vermont ($86,315) are spending almost 30% of their gross income on child care.[78] This is unaffordable and unsustainable for many families, especially when you account for housing, food, utilities, transportation, clothing and other basic needs. Over the next several years, we recommend expanding the income eligibility guidelines for the program to include families earning up to Vermont's Livable Wage (a measure

[a] The federal poverty level is calculated each year by the US Census Bureau for statistical purposes. This measure is used by the US Department of Health and Human Services to develop the federal poverty guidelines, which are used to guide administration of some federal and state programs. For 2018, the federal poverty level for a four-person family is $25,100. This means that a four-person family earning up to this amount is considered to live in poverty. 300% of the federal poverty guidelines means that the family earns 3 times more than the amount the US Census Bureau has established as the federal poverty level for the given family size.

created by the Vermont Joint Fiscal Office that estimates the hourly and annual wage a family would need to earn to meet their basic needs—housing, food, clothing, transportation, health care, child care and personal expenses).[9] For a family of four with two working adults and two children, this is equivalent to approximately 425% of the 2018 federal poverty guidelines for a 4-person family ($106,675).

For 2019, we recommend expanding CCFAP's income eligibility cap from 300% of the federal poverty guidelines to 350% of the federal poverty guidelines.

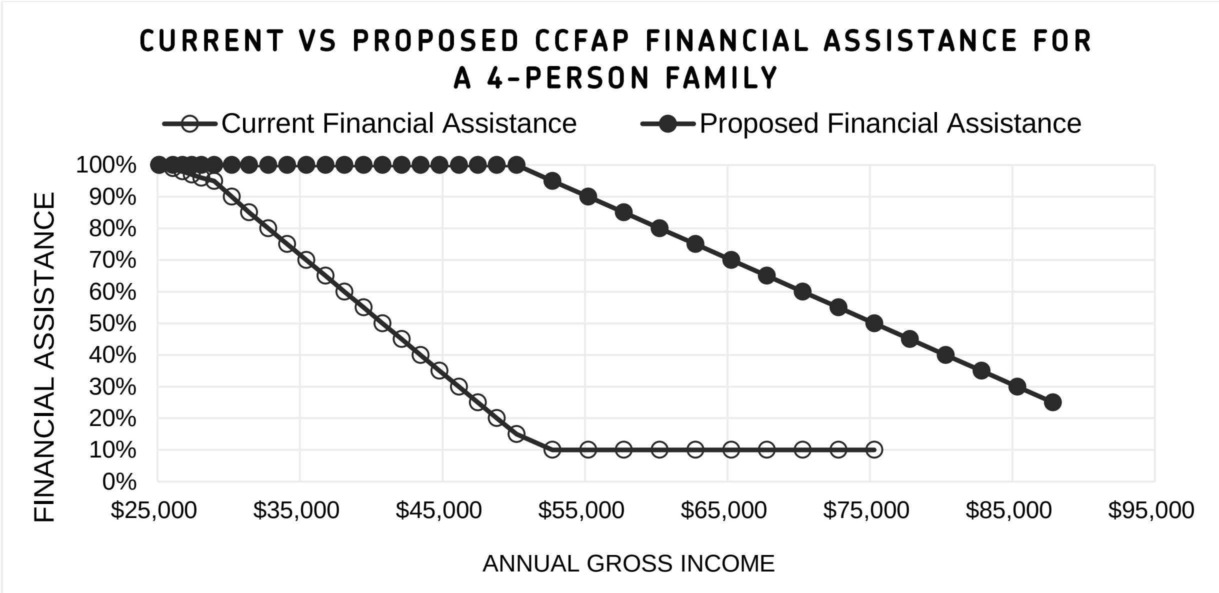
Make Child Care More Affordable

Let's Grow Kids recommends restructuring the sliding scale used to determine benefits for eligible families. Currently, the sliding scale decreases the amount of child care financial assistance received as a family's income increases. However, for families earning 130% or more of the federal poverty level (at least $32,630 for a four-person family), the decreases in benefits can end up being more like financial cliffs. In many cases, a small-to-moderate raise that can bump a family into the next benefit level would not fully cover the increased portion of child care costs a family would be expected to pay.

In order to address this issue, Let's Grow Kids recommends making the following changes to the benefit sliding scale in 2019:

- Increase eligibility for 100% financial assistance[b]
  - Through the Blue Ribbon Commission, Summit and Think Tank process, the need to extend full child care financial assistance was discussed at length, with families and stakeholders recommending that this benefit level eventually be offered to families earning up to Vermont's livable wage. As an interim step, **we recommend that the Legislature extend 100% financial assistance to families who earn up to 200% of the federal poverty level, or $50,200 a year for a family of four (100% assistance currently stops once a family exceeds 100% of the federal poverty level, or $25,100 for a family of four).**
- Adjust benefit levels
  - Currently, the financial assistance offered to families earning between 230% and 300% of the 2018 federal poverty level is only 10% financial assistance. This low rate means that many low-income families are forced to cover co-pays so high that they are still unable to afford child care. We recommend increasing this benefit to no less than 25% financial assistance—so that it provides more meaningful support to families—and adjusting the other steps of the sliding scale to prevent financial cliffs for families. This will mean that families are able to take a small-to-moderate pay raise without worrying about potentially jeopardizing their ability to pay for child care.

[b] Important note: Financial assistance means a certain percentage of a reimbursement rate set by the state (how much the state pays a child care provider on behalf of a family). This reimbursement rate may or may not be equal to the amount a child care or early learning program actually charges families for care. A family is responsible for their portion of the reimbursement rate as well as any gap between the reimbursement rate and the child care program's actual tuition rate. This means that a family could qualify for 100% financial assistance and still need to pay out-of-pocket for child care or early learning programming.



- Increase Rates Paid to Child Care Programs
  - Let's Grow Kids recommends paying child care and early learning programs fair rates for the care and education they provide our children. Unfortunately, the rates CCFAP pays providers—known as reimbursement rates—are aligned with outdated information on the cost of child care for preschool-age and after-school-age children. This means that child care and early learning programs are being paid less than what they actually charge for tuition for these age groups. Vermont has made several incremental investments over the past few years to begin to address this gap for infants and toddlers, but it will require continued commitment to bring reimbursement rates in line and keep them in line with the actual cost of providing quality care.
  - **For 2019, we recommend that:**
    - **Preschool and afterschool rates be aligned with the 2017 Vermont Market Rate Survey rates; and**
    - **Moving forward, that reimbursement rates be aligned with Vermont Market Rate Survey findings annually.**
  - By increasing reimbursement rates, programs will be more fairly compensated for the care and education they provide. In addition, families will owe a smaller co-pay, because there won't be as big of a gap between CCFAP's reimbursement rates and the actual cost of tuition for child care and early learning programs. This is a win-win for kids and for early educators who currently accept very low wages because families cannot afford the true cost of care.

We understand that new IT infrastructure may be needed in order to accomplish these recommendations. If found to be the case, we also recommend supporting the IT infrastructure upgrades in the state budget.

Legislative Priority 2: Sustain and Grow Vermont's Early Education Workforce

Vermont does not have enough qualified early educators to fill open positions at early care and learning programs.[10] This limits the system's ability to meet demand. A significant factor in this shortage is low wages.

It's hard to raise a family on $12.71 an hour, the median hourly wage for a child care worker in Vermont. College graduates who earn bachelors' degrees in early education earn the least of any college degree in the country, including the least of any education-related degree.[11] In Vermont, on average, a kindergarten teacher earns $24,000 more per year than a lead preschool teacher with similar qualifications.[12,13] To address the current wage gap, recruit new early educators, and retain current early educators, Let's Grow Kids joins Building Bright Futures in recommending scholarship and student loan repayment programs to support Vermont's early educators, and we encourage consideration of refundable tax credits for early educators, to ensure the sustainability of this critical field of work.

Attract New Early Educators

Paying back student loans can be challenging for new early educators. According to recent Vermont Public Radio and Vermont Public Broadcasting Station polling data, Vermonters ages 18 to 44 reported that the cost of education is one of the most financially stressful expenses they face, coming in second only to the cost of housing.[14] In Vermont, the average student loan debt burden is $30,651.[15] This is a serious concern for new early educators who may only earn $11.17 an hour as they start out in the early care and learning field.[16] To address early educator shortages and support early educators in meeting their monthly student loan repayment obligations, other states and even the federal government have created student loan repayment programs to help ease the financial burden on new early educators.[17] These programs make it more affordable for new early educators to commit to working in the field.

To address the need for more early educators in Vermont, we recommend launching a student loan repayment program for new early educators in Vermont.

Who qualifies

The program should be open to early educators who graduated with a bachelor's or master's degree in early education or early special education within the past three years (2016–2019) who meet the following criteria:

- During college or university, was a Vermont resident who obtained a degree from an in- or out-of-state college or university or was an out-of-state resident who obtained a degree from a Vermont college or university; and
- Holds a position as a lead teacher for infants, toddlers, or preschoolers/pre-K with a regulated Vermont family child care home or center-based child care or preschool program, including prequalified pre-K programs; and
- Earns an annual salary equal to or less than $40,000 per year.

These eligibility criteria would allow the program to support early educators who are likely to have the hardest time making ends meet, and the expanded eligibility would allow early care and learning programs to more quickly fill vacant positions. Moving forward, the program could be open to the above categories of early educators who graduate in the given calendar year.

What participants receive

If an early educator qualifies for the program, we recommend that they be eligible for the following student loan repayment support:

- Early educators working as lead teacher for an infant or toddler classroom (where Vermont has the greatest shortage of available care) receive up to $3,000 per year in student loan repayment support; and
- Early educators working as a lead teacher in a preschool/pre-K classroom receive up to $2,000 per year in student loan repayment support.

There is a critical need to expand infant and toddler child care capacity in Vermont. Other states that have similar programs have had success addressing those gaps by offering higher incentives for these "critical need" categories. For both groups of early educators, the amounts noted, if paid out on a monthly basis, are likely to provide meaningful financial support.

Length of Program

Finally, to ensure that early educators are able to make the transition from college to career and work toward higher wages, we recommend that participants be eligible for the program for up to 5 years. This allows the program to both recruit and retain qualified early educators and grow Vermont's overall workforce.

Support Current Early Educators

T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood is a national, evidence-based initiative that provides scholarships through a cost-sharing model to individuals currently working in early care and learning programs who want to pursue higher education in the field. The model is currently implemented in 22 states and the District of Columbia.[18]

Vermont's T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program, administered by the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VtAEYC), provides scholarships, book and travel funds, release-time funds, contract completion bonuses, and career counseling to individuals currently working in early care and learning programs who are seeking an associate's degree in early childhood education or individuals with a bachelor's degree who are seeking early childhood teacher licensure or endorsement through the Vermont Agency of Education.

With state support, the program would have the ability to expand to provide scholarship support to individuals who want to pursue a bachelor's degree in early education, and would also support more students in both its associate degree scholarship program and teacher licensure program. **Let's Grow Kids supports VtAEYC's request for additional funding from the state to expand the T.E.A.C.H. program in Vermont.**

Address the Early Educator Wage Gap

The wage gap faced by early educators in Vermont is an issue that many states are facing across the country. Other states are using a variety of tactics to effectively address the wage gap in the short-term to provide immediate financial relief to early educators while working to address root causes to create a sustainable system for families and early educators.

One new tool to address the wage gap is through refundable tax credits. In Louisiana, tax credits are offered based on an early educator's educational attainment and experience. This structure has not only meant real financial relief to early educators, but it has also encouraged increased professional development for early educators. Between 2008 (the year before Louisiana's tax credits were enacted) and 2015, Louisiana saw an increase in early educator professional development across all education and skill levels. From 2008 to 2015, the number of early educators achieving a Teacher Level 1 credential (equivalent to a Child Development Associate certification) increased from 963 to 3,598; an increase of 374%. Additionally, the state experienced an increase in the number of early educators attaining higher-level credentials (Levels 2, 3 or 4) from 284 to 2,156.[19,20]

Based on the success of this approach in Louisiana, **we recommend exploring a similar program to address the early educator wage gap in Vermont.**

Such a model could be structured as follows:

- All early educators working in a regulated family child care home or center-based child care or preschool program who work with infants, toddlers or preschoolers should be eligible for the program.
- The amount of the refundable tax credit should be dependent on the education and experience of the early educator, as detailed in the early educator's Northern Lights' Early Childhood Career Ladder credentials.[21]
- After the first year of the program, the value of the tax credits should be adjusted accordingly for inflation.
- Given that this program is intended to support early educators during a transition period for an early care and learning system, we recommend that the program sunset after the 2024 tax year.

Legislative Priority 3: Engage Employers

Employers are a critical partner in addressing Vermont's child care challenges. Their success hinges on having reliable, productive employees. For many employees, child care is a make-or-break consideration when figuring out how to balance work and family needs. Employers can play a role in helping to financially support their employees' child care needs and invest in our state's early care and learning system. However, figuring out how to help address employees' child care challenges can be hard for employers, especially for small businesses or start-ups.

In the US, 29 states have implemented some form of tax credit for employers to engage them in providing child care support to their employees or a state's early care and learning system as a whole.[22] States that have seen the most success have also had technical assistance available to businesses to help them design and implement effective strategies to support employees' child care needs. In Vermont, Let's Grow Kids has launched a pilot project to provide HR consultation services to employers that wish to explore offering some kind of child care support to employees. This creates an opportune moment to pair strategic technical assistance with real monetary support.


John W. Casella, CEO Casella Waste Systems, Inc.

Let's Grow Kids recommends offering refundable tax credits for employers for the next six tax years to help them launch, sustain or grow child care supports for their employees and provide direct financial support to Vermont's early care and learning system.

Given that child care needs can look different from one community to the next, we propose that business tax credits be available for employers with the following qualifying expenses:

- Expenses to construct, renovate, expand or repair an eligible child care or early learning program, purchase equipment for an eligible child care or early learning program, or maintain or operate an eligible child care or early learning program; and/or
- Payments made toward the child care or early learning tuition at an eligible child care or early learning program for a child of an employee; and/or
- The purchase of child care slots reserved or provided for children of employees at eligible child care facilities; and/or
- In-kind or monetary donations to an eligible child care or early learning program, one of Vermont's parent child centers, or one of Vermont's community child care support agencies.

Based on the experiences of other states, we recommend that the total funds available for this program be capped in any given tax year. Additionally, because this credit is intended to incentivize changes in business practices while the early care and learning system in Vermont undergoes more systematic transformation, we recommend that the credit sunset at the end of the 2024 tax year.

Legislative Priority 4: Establish an Early Care & Education Fund

One approach that some states have recently taken to ensure that there is sufficient funding dedicated to early care and learning program is to create a dedicated fund within the state's budget (similar to Vermont's education fund). This allows a state to better understand funding priorities and analyze outcomes.

Let's Grow Kids supports the Think Tank's recommendation to establish a dedicated early care and learning fund in the Vermont state budget.

Conclusion

Our 2019 legislative agenda is ambitious, but it focuses on core system elements that will establish the foundation for critical work toward implementing the Blue Ribbon Commission's and Think Tank's recommendations for our future early care and learning system. It is also supported by 21,620 Vermonters who have signed the Let's Grow Kids Petition calling on Vermont policymakers to increase investment in our early care and learning system.

By ensuring that:

- More children have access to high-quality, affordable child care;
- Child care is more affordable for more Vermont families;
- Child care and early learning programs are paid fair rates for the care and education they provide;
- Vermont can attract and retain talented early educators;
- Employers are engaged partners in Vermont's early care and learning system; and
- Dedicated funding is available for Vermont's early care and learning system;

we are reaffirming Vermont's core commitment to children and families and establishing a firm foundation for future systems work.

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[10] This statement is based on concerns raised at multiple Building Bright Futures state and regional committees and analysis of job postings on the Early Childhood Jobs VT website, a job posting site for early care and learning positions in Vermont, as of 2018. Early Childhood Jobs VT is a project managed by the Let's Grow Kids programs team.

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[21] Vermont Northern Lights Career Development Center. (n.d.). Early Childhood Career Ladder. Retrieved from https://northernlightscdc.org/career-pathways/early-childhood-pathways/.

[22] Since 1981, 29 states have enacted one or more tax credits for employers providing child care benefits: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin. See Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. §§ 43-1075(A), -1163(A) (1994) (sunset in 2015); Ark. Code Ann. §§ 26-51-507 to -508, -52-516, -53-132 (2017); Cal. Rev. & Tax Code §§ 17052.17–.18, 23617 (Deering 2005), repealed by 2006 Cal. Stat. Ch. 712, §§ 1–2; Colo. Rev. Stat. §§ 39-22-121, -517, -521 (2017); Conn. Gen. Stat. §§ 12-217x, -634 (2017); Fla. Stat. §§ 220.19, 624.5107 (2008), amended by 2009 Fla. Laws ch. 2009-20, §§ 5, 19; Fla. Stat. § 411.0102 (2012), repealed by 2013 Fla. Laws ch. 252, § 29; Ga. Code Ann. § 48-7-40.6 (2017); 35 Ill. Comp. Stat. 5/210 (2017); Kan. Stat. Ann. § 79-32,190 (2017); La. Stat. Ann. § 47:6107 (2017); 36 Me. Rev. Stat. § 2524 (2014), amended by 2015 Me. Laws ch. 390, § 6; 36 Me. Rev. Stat. § 5217 (2014), amended by 2015 Me. Laws ch. 267, § DD-22; Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 21-309 (2017); Md. Code Ann., Ins. § 6-115 (2017); Md. Code Ann., Tax – Gen. §§ 8-413, 8-216 (2017); Md. Code Ann., Tax – Gen. § 8-410 (2007), repealed by 2008 Md. Laws, ch. 391, § 1; Md. Code Ann., Ins. § 6-105.1 (2006), repealed by 2007 Md. Laws, ch. 370, § 4; Md. Code Ann., Tax – Gen. § 8-213 (2006), repealed by 2007 Md. Laws, ch. 370, § 2; Mich. Comp. Laws § 208.39a(b)(4) (1991), repealed by 1993 Mich. Pub. Acts, no. 329, § 2; Miss. Code Ann. § 57-73-23 (2017); Mont. Code Ann. §§ 15-30-2373, -31-131, -31-133 (2017); Neb. Rev. Stat. § 77-27,222 (2006), repealed by 2007 Neb. Laws ch. 367, § 30; Nev. Rev. Stat. § 364A.140 (2002), repealed by 2003 Nev. Stat. ch. 5, § 186; 1999 N.J. Laws, ch. 102; 1999 N.J. Laws, ch. 108; N.M. Stat. Ann. § 7-2A-14 (2017); Ohio Rev. Code Ann. §§ 5733.36–38 (2017); Ohio Rev. Code Ann. §§ 5747.34–.36 (2014), repealed by 2015 Ohio Laws, File 30, § 2; Okl. St. tit. 68, § 2357.26 (2012), repealed by 2013 Okla. Sess. Laws ch. 363, § 7; Or. Rev. Stat. §§ 315.204, .208, .213 (2017); Or. Rev. Stat. §§ 329A.703, .706 (2017); 72 Pa. Stat. Ann. §§ 8703-A, 8706-A (2003), amended by 2004 Pa. Laws 116; R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 44-47-1, -3 (2017); S.c. Code Ann. § 12-6-3440 (2017); Tenn. Code Ann. § 67-4-2009(3) (2008), repealed by 2009 Tenn. Pub. Acts, ch. 530, §2; Tex. Tax Code Ann. §§ 171.701 – 171.707 (2005), repealed by 2006 Tex. Gen. Laws 79th Leg. 3rd C.S., ch. 1, §18(a)(3); Va. Code Ann. § 58.1-439.4 (2017); Wis. Stat. § 71.07(2dd) (1996), repealed by 1997 Wis. Sess. Laws, Act 27, § 2261h.